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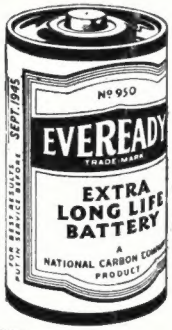

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Tex Delaney and his Mexican pard Chili head for the Brasada to turn their guns against the vicious sidewinders who are fomenting a grim range war that threatens havoc!.....11

Quick-Trigger Short Stories

BANK ON BOOT HILL.....Tom Parsons 66
Paul Pace, new cashier in Rawhide, seems timid—but proves otherwise

ZORRO FIGHTS A DUEL....Johnston McCulley 75
Again Zorro's blade flashes red as an arrogant killer hurls defiance at him!

OLD SHERIFF.....Sam Brant 83
When death stalks a cowtown, law music soothes a six-gun killer

and

THE CHUCK WAGON.....Foghorn Clancy 6
Join the RANGE RIDERS' CHUCK WAGON CLUB! Coupon on Page 96

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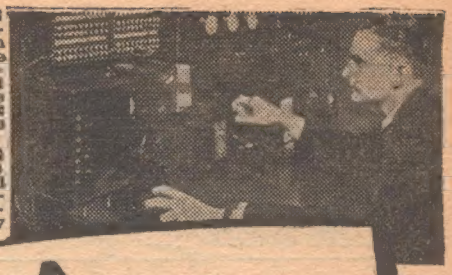

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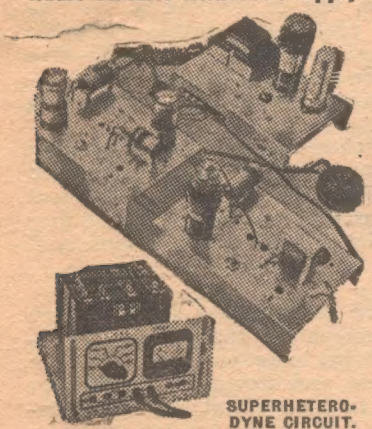

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HI WADDIES, we are now well into the New Year, and trying as best we can to make it a happy one, at the same time not forgetting that our boys are fighting and dying on the battlefields.

We had hoped that a complete victory over Germany would have been attained ere this, but we hoped in vain, so now we will just have to continue hoping for victory.

In the meantime one rodeo man has learned that his nephew is a prisoner of war in Germany.

Poor kid, it has been only a few years since he used to visit the rodeos, alive with interest, thrilled at the daring deeds of the cowboys in the arena, and vowing that some day he would be a rodeo performer that would win the applause of the crowds.

We are applauding now, Jimmy, applauding because you are just like so many, many thousands of American boys who have what it takes to bring victory to our armed forces, and we are hoping that you may yet become the rodeo performer that you wished to be!

The name of the boy taken prisoner is Jimmy Cowen, of Webb City, Missouri. The uncle who received the news is Foghorn Clancy.

Battlefield Meeting

Rodeo folks do meet on the battlefields. Col. and Mrs. Jim Eskew received in November a letter from both their sons in service. The letters were both in the same envelope and mailed from the South Pacific.

They were from Junior Eskew, fancy roper with the JE Ranch Rodeo and one of the star ropers for the past several years at the Madison Square Garden Rodeo, who is in the Special Service Department, entered the service last February and went overseas in September, and his brother Tom Mix Eskew. Tom was a trick rider and pickup man with the JE Ranch (their father's) Rodeo.

Brother, as Tom is called by all who know him, enlisted in the artillery nearly three years ago and has been over in the South Pacific more than two years, and the two just happened to meet in the South Pacific.

Gene Autry Show

The Gene Autry Rodeo in connection with the Houston Texas Fat Stock Show has been a big rodeo ever since it started eight years ago, and is expected to be bigger than ever this year as conditions in and around Houston are excellent. Shipyards, refineries and all war plants are working at capacity.

Everett Colborn, of the Lightning C. Ranch of Dublin, Texas, who will produce and direct the rodeo, was in Houston in December arranging preliminary details and while there purchased several carloads of Brahma bulls, and made arrangements for the necessary roping calves and Mexican bulldogging steers.

Rodeo spectators in the East, when they see the vicious gyrating Brahma bulls in the arenas, think that they are just about the toughest animals on four feet, and they are, but the Brahma bulls that do their stuff in the arenas in Texas are very apt to be even tougher.

As a rule the Brahmas are gathered from the salt grass marshes of the gulf coast country and are shown in action in the arenas in that section first, and they are just about the wildest things in the world at that first showing, especially if the arena happens to be an indoor arena such as the Houston arena.

These wild cattle, never having been in a building before, are apt to try and break through a solid wall. They are more or less in the position of a cornered rat and the Brahmas, always ready to fight, are more ready when cornered in such indoor arenas for the first time. Later, after bucking in many arenas, most of those brought East have already learned that they can't butt down solid walls.

(Continued on page 88)

MUSIC LESSONS

for less than 7¢ a day!

FOUND ACCORDION EASY

"I've always wanted to play the piano accordion," writes *H. E. from Canada. "But thought I'd never learn it. Then I read about your lessons, I don't know how to express my satisfaction."

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BEST METHOD BY FAR

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*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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YOU SAY you'd love to learn music but can't afford a private teacher? Then listen to this . . . You can now learn to play your favorite instrument — as thousands of others have — for LESS THAN SEVEN CENTS A DAY! And that small sum covers everything — including sheet music! It doesn't take long, either. You can learn to play quicker than you ever dreamed possible!

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How is it possible? Well, you learn by a modern method that does away with humdrum scales and exercises. You spend your time playing interesting pieces from real notes. It's really FUN learning to play this modern way —it makes practicing a pastime instead of a bore. More than 750,000 pupils have enrolled for this amazing course.

A Sound Method

The secret of this method that has taught thousands to play is simple. It's based on the fact that the lessons not only tell you what to do, in the printed instructions. They actually show you — with large, clear pictures— what positions to take—every move to make. You read how to play a tune —you see how to play it—then you play it and hear how it goes. A teacher at your side couldn't make it more clear.

NOTICE

Please don't confuse the U. S. School of Music method with any system of teaching music "by ear" or by trick charts. Our method teaches you to play by actual notes — not by any trick or number system.

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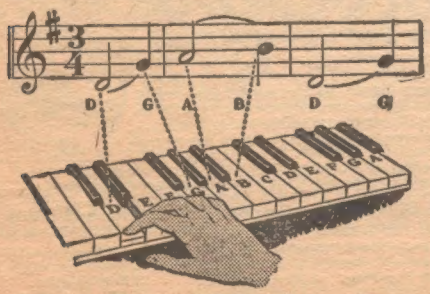
SIMPLE AS A-B-C

Yet it's from the famous "Merry Widow" Waltz



From the above diagram you can see for yourself how easy it is to learn by this Print and Picture method. You simply look at the music and diagram and see which notes to strike. In a few minutes you will find yourself playing the famous "Merry Widow Waltz."

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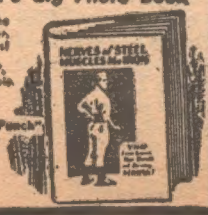

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As Delaney strode forward his gun leaped into his fist, menacing the beef-skinners (CHAPTER V)

OLD TEXAS DAYS

By LARRY A. HARRIS

Tex Delaney and his Mexican pard Chili head for the Brasada to turn their guns against the vicious sidewinders who are fomenting a grim range war that threatens havoc!

CHAPTER I

Over the Wall

FALL rains had set in, shrouding the Ohio River country in mist and fog and hinting of an early winter. Elm, maple and oak trees that timbered the rolling hills and gullies had leaves of gold and brown and brilliant red that would flutter to the ground before the first snow.

Near the broad river, Fayette Prison stood like an ancient fortress, a grim reminder to the river-boat men who passed it of the horrors of the Civil War. For inside Fayette Prison were gaunt, bitter-eyed men in the drab gray of the Confederacy who had fought with Lee through to Amelia Court House on the Danville Railroad, when Sheri-

Mustang Valley Throbs to Smokepole Music

dan's horde captured them. But even with capture they had refused to acknowledge the gall of defeat.

As night spread its mantle of gloom the barred windows of the prison glowed with yellow light. At the front gate a slicker-clad Union trooper paced back and forth, a rifle on his shoulder, his bearded face wet with rain. Inside a gong rang, signifying that mess was over. Booted feet beat a dull rhythm as grim prisoners returned to their cells.

In solitary, "Tex" Delaney waited until the guards passed, then stepped to the single barred window. For a week now those guards had watched Tex Delaney closely. Just seven days ago his cellmate, "Chili" Cortina, had escaped—going over the wall in a hail of lead.

The prison guards had not watched Chili Cortina as closely as they might have done. Apparently they didn't think the meek, flea-bitten little Mexican had it in him to escape. That mistaken judgement on the guards' part was in Chili's favor. Since then Tex Delaney had been grilled the rough way. They figured Delaney knew which way Chili would flee. But they hadn't figured a man could be as tough as Tex Delaney.

Two nights ago, Delaney had faced the men who would make him talk, his bleeding lips pulled back in a mirthless grin, a tall, wide-shouldered Texan with cold, blue eyes. Prison Hades and the grueling ravages of war made him look older than his twenty-six years. His curly brown hair was shaggy, his face bearded. He stood well over six feet and had the big-knuckled fists of a fighter.

"Chili," he told the prison officials, "is long gone. It'll take more than you an' yore bloodhounds ever to get him back. If I knew exactly where he was I'd let yuh kill me before I told yuh. Now crack yore whip, an' let's get this confab over with."

They cracked their whips, all right. But before they subdued Tex Delaney and threw him into solitary he knocked three of the burly guards cold.

NOW Delaney peered out into the rainy black night. Yonder, across the river, the hilltop that held his gaze took dim shape against the storm-tossed night. If things went right Chili Cortina would be up there sometime between now and dawn. He would light a fire that would be the signal.

Thunder began rumbling, the surrounding hills tossing back the echoes. Then lightning followed, splitting the inky heavens in blinding flashes of light, revealing the wind-bent trees in their silvery splendor.

From his pants pocket, Delaney pulled out a stained, frayed letter. He knew almost every word by heart. A month ago one of the guards had told Delaney that a letter had come to the prison addressed to him. And Delaney had bribed the guard by giving him the only thing of value he possessed—a turquoise ring that his mother had bought shortly before she died.

By the flashes of lightning, Delaney's eyes scanned the feminine scrawl that said:

Dear Tex:

You may be surprised when you get this, but I was just as surprised when I learned that you

TEX DELANEY

were still alive. There is a Captain Lew Strang, a Yankee soldier stationed here with a company of troopers. Just by chance I happened to mention your name to him and he knew you. He said you and some other of General Lee's men had been imprisoned after the war for acts of treason. That is all I could learn from him.

We all thought you were dead, Tex. I do hope you get this letter. I've told no one what Captain Strang told me, for it may not be true. But if you get a chance, write to me, and if there is anything I can do to help I'll do it.

Texas is changed since the war. The ranchers are no longer shipping their cattle, for their markets are glutted. Cattle are dying by the thousands and are being skinned for their hides. Rustlers and killers are getting rich stealing the hides of other men's beef, and the law and soldiers can do nothing about it.

A Frenchman from New Orleans has come into

Mustang Valley and bought all the land he can lay a hand to. His name is Lamont, and nobody trusts him. There is so much bloodshed and trouble. Your father is old and needs help. Why don't you write him? I know you and he didn't get along, but he is still your father.

Love,
Starr

Delaney shoved the letter back into his pocket, a tight, queer feeling in his throat. At best it was a puzzling letter. Impetuous, flashing-eyed Starr Hoskins had promised to marry Tex Delaney five years ago. Her letter had come to Delaney like a ghostly voice out of the past, haunting him with memories.

He started, heart hammering against his ribs. High on the hill across the river blinked the tiny light of a camp-fire. Gladness poured through Delaney. Hope beat wildly through him in a cross-current of emotions.

"Chili," he whispered. "Good boy!"

He turned from the window, strode to the barred door, trying desperately to bridle the clamoring excitement inside him. For this moment he had waited and dared, suffered and worked with all the tedious patience a man can know.

The guard was at the far end of the gloomy corridor, back turned in sober contemplation as he gazed out the open door at the storm-swept court-yard. Delaney whirled, sprang to his bunk. Cold sweat beaded his face as he crawled beneath it and began removing one of the large flat-faced stones.

Night after night Delaney had worked here, picking the mortar loose, crumbling it and tossing it out the window. A knife he had managed to steal from the kitchen was his only tool. Luck had sided him thus far. After removing the huge wall stone he had found the outer stone mortar sodden and wet from the moist earth of the prison yard. However, once free from his cell he still had the open yard and the eight foot wall to dare.

Cautiously, he inched the first stone from its lodging, shoved it back into one corner of his cell out of sight. Footsteps sounded in the corridor. Quickly, Delaney flopped on his bunk, closing his eyes. With breath tight-held, he heard the guard pause at his door, peer in. A lantern in the man's hand pushed back the sodden shadows of the cell. Then, apparently satisfied, he grunted and went on.

That was the guard's last cursory inspection for the night, Delaney knew. Swiftly, he crawled back to the aperture in the wall and began jabbing at the mortar with the dull blade. The roar of the storm deadened the tiny sounds he made.

FOR an hour or more he kept at it, pushing, prying, until the outer stone came loose. The muscles in his neck and broad back bulged as he shoved. The hammering pulse in his temples were like pile-driver blows as he felt the rain and mud on his hands. Chill night air, damp and clammy, gushed in through the hole.

For seconds he lay there, thankfulness and hope tingling through every fiber of his being, measuring his chances. One wrong move now meant death. Tense, he listened. No alien sound stabbed at his nerves. He grinned coldly.

"Good luck, Tex," he murmured.

He poked his head into the hole, then his shoulders, pushing with his toes. It was a tight squeeze for a man of his size. Inch by inch he wedged himself through. Cold rain beat down on his exposed head and shoulders. Jagged lightning crashed through the murky heavens, and in that instantaneous glare Delaney spotted the guard at the front gate.

He caught his breath, flattened, nerves keyed to explosive pitch. When no shout of discovery came, he lifted his head, peered through the black downpour toward the prison wall, a hundred yards away. Beyond that lay the brush-tangled thickets and the river. Freedom!

Delaney crouched, all flame and ice. Then, bent low, he made his bid, covering the ground in long strides. Each second he expected the crash of a rifle, the sickening smash of a bullet in his back. He felt the rain in his face, the sting of it on his sweat-plastered body. Then like a bounding cougar he hit the wall in one leap, finding a slippery hold for his fingers, straddling it as he had once straddled wild broncs when a kid.

A rifle roared somewhere behind him as he leaped into the brush on the other side. In mid-air a hot poker seemed to touch his left arm above the elbow. He stumbled, breath gusting from his lungs. Above the bedlam of the storm rose yells of the prison guards in the yard behind. A bell began clanging, adding to the tumult.

Delaney came to his feet running, crashing through the brush toward the river, one hundred and eighty pounds of unleashed brawn and muscle. Deeper into the labyrinth of rain-lashed gullies he plunged, guided by the occasional flashes of lightning. Back of him sounds of the aroused prison dimmed. But in another hour the dreaded blood-hounds would be on his trail.

Twice in that run for freedom, Delaney

paused, making certain of his directions. Breath tore from his lungs in great sobs. Fierce elation shook him as he went on, feeling his way through knee-deep mud until he came to the bank of the thundering river.

And there at the designated cove, he burst through the willows to see a dim shape rise up in the night before him. A rain-drenched, bareheaded little man leaped from the bow of a small, flat-bottomed scow, his croaking cry of joy slicing through the storm.

"Tex! *Que hubo, compadre!* Yuh made eet!"

He fairly pounced on Delaney, wringing his hand and jabbering excitedly. The loyalty and courage of this little Mexican hellion touched Delaney.

"We'll have to hurry, Chili!" he panted.

"*Andale* she ees, Tex!"

They climbed quickly into the scow and shoved off, each man with a single oar. The breast of the raging flood caught them, swirled them away from the brush-fringed shore and downstream. As they passed within rifle shot of the prison they heard the baying of the hounds, the clang of the bell, and the faint shouts of men—sounds muted by the crash and roar of the storm.

Then they rounded a bend in the river and Delaney breathed easier. The burning sensation of his arm wound gave way to molten streams of pain that engulfed his entire body. He gritted his teeth against the nausea. He felt the warm blood drip from his finger tips.

Shivering, wet and miserable, they pulled into a brushy covert at dawn. Here, miles below the prison, Delaney explained that they would wait the day through and go on again at nightfall. Only then did Chili notice the blood on Delaney's hand. Concern leaped into his bloodshot eyes.

"*Por Dios,* Tex! You are shot!"

Delaney forced a grin he didn't feel. "We've both been shot before, Chili," he gritted. "I't just a flesh wound. Help me tear off my shirt tail and make a poultice of mud."

As the little Mexican scrambled around to help, he kept up a running fire of talk. It was all a strange and bewildering land to him.

Delaney asked him where he had been since escaping. Chili chuckled. He was a bedraggled figure. His long black hair was plastered with rain. Both he and Delaney were still wearing the tattered gray uniform of the Confederacy.

Chili explained that he had hidden in the woods for days, playing hide and seek with the bloodhounds. Farther upstream he had found the scow. Tonight he had crossed the river to the hilltop, found some dry sticks and started the fire.

"Now where do we goes from here, Tex?" he asked anxiously.

"Home, Chili," Delaney said grimly. "Back to the Brasada. There's perdition in Texas—an' I aim to have a hand in it."

"Weeth Mexico ees thees trouble, Tex?"

"I don't know," Delaney said honestly.

Chili glanced down at his shapeless, muddy boots.

"Whatever ees the trouble, Tex," he murmured, "I'm steekin' weeth yuh."

Delaney nodded. "That's the way I want it, Chili."

CHAPTER II

Memories

DELANEY and Chili hauled their scow up in the brush and crawled beneath it while the storm raged on. After a time Chili slept from utter exhaustion. But Delaney lay awake, tortured with bitter memories and the fiery pain of his wound.

It wasn't like Starr Hoskins to write a letter like the one she had sent. Something was wrong in Mustang Valley in Texas. Desperately wrong. That much Delaney could tell by reading between the lines. And it puzzled him.

Starr had always been more like a pard to him than a sweetheart. Bronze-haired and lovely, she had grown up conscious of her charms, and knew how to use them. Coquettish and daring, she had always been a source of worry to her mild-mannered father—and the center of gossip for the few straight-laced old ladies in Mosquero town.

Until the Civil War things had gone fairly well in that far-flung frontier between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande. Bitterness in the minds of the Border people over the Mexican War was dying. It was still disputed land—that wild, sparsely settled stretch of mesquite between the two rivers, despite the Hidalgo Treaty which conceded the land to Texas.

Mustang Valley was not far from the Border. Here intrepid Texans had settled, braving the dangers of Kickapoos and Comanches, renegade Mexicans and roving American brigands. Here they built their homes and ranches, grimly accepting the challenge of the Frontier—honest, God-fearing men who had fought and suffered that bloody red dawn at San Jacinto.

Frank Delaney—Tex's father—was a big, stern-visaged man of few words. What he did or said was law among the other scattered ranchers. Tex's mother had died when

As Delaney came out of the blanket, trouble reared its ugly head (CHAPTER XII)

he was born, and Frank Delaney cursed the fate that had deprived him of her. There was never that intimacy and understanding between father and son that there should have been.

Everybody expected Tex and Starr Hoskins to marry. Fine pair, folks said. Only Starr was too wild and uppity for a gent like Tex Delaney. She preferred frilly dresses to the calico most women wore.

"Starr is a good girl, Tex," "Bowie" Hoskins, her father, had told Delaney. "I mean that, even if she is my daughter. She's just like a colt that needs tamin', and yuh're the one that can do it. I'm just hopin', son, that the day will come when you two young 'uns will get hitched. My Leanin' H and yore pa's Horseshoe spread would be one then."

Bowie Hoskins had been deadly serious. But the next day when Delaney had mentioned it to Starr she laughed lightly.

"Sure, I'll marry you, Tex."

"When?"

"*Manana.*"

Tex had grinned boyishly. "In Mexican that means the tomorrow that never comes, Starr."

"Well, maybe that's the way our marriage will be," she teased.

"Mebbeso."

"But I do like you, Tex."

"Reckon that goes double, sorrel-top," he had said, and grinned.

After that, Tex heard the rumblings of war—the Civil War. Gossip, rumors swept the far-flung borders of the Brasada like wildfire. Texas, a new state in the Union, flamed with indignation and swung to the Confederacy.

Tex's patriotic fervor had become aroused. When he'd told his father his plans, the oldster's face hardened.

"I forbid yuh to go, son!" he rapped.

Rebellion had flared in Tex. "I'm goin' anyhow, Dad," he'd said tightly. "I feel it's my duty."

Rage had shaken Frank Delaney. "Duty!" he echoed fiercely. "Yore duty is here helpin' on the ranch, Tex! Mustang Valley is the place for you—not hundreds of miles away from here fightin' somebody else's battles. If yuh want to fight, organize some boys here and clean out Cortina's raidin' band of Mexicans across the river. They've always been a thorn in our side. And will continue to be till they're wiped out."

Tex Delaney had known that nothing he could say would change his father. Tex had been twenty-one, and with a mind of his own. It had not been the first time he and his father had disagreed.

That night when he pulled out, Frank Delaney stood in the doorway, face working with suppressed rage.

THAT had been the last time Delaney had seen his father. Neither had written during the intervening years. In Mosquero town, Delaney met three other youths who were answering the call. Among them was Chili Cortina. Chili had been born and reared on the north side of the Rio Grande. His mother was Irish, his father Spanish. He was Tex's own age, a meek-appearing but fiery young gent who could cuss in two languages.

Embittered because gringo settlers had laid claim to an old Cortina land grant, Chili's father had moved to the south side of the Rio Grande years before. Raids and rustling had been laid to Senor Cortina. Rumor had it that he had political ambitions to claim all the Brasada and rule it in the name of Mexico.

But Chili had none of his sire's aspirations. As youths, he and Delaney had hunted together. Chili was proud of his Texas heritage. When Delaney told him he was going to war, Chili hadn't known what it was all about. But the devil himself couldn't have kept him from going along.

Starr Hoskins met Delaney in town that night. She kissed him and did her best to keep from crying.

"I know there's nothing I can say that will make you change your mind, Tex. All I can do is to wish you luck. If—when you come back I'll marry you. That is, if you still like me."

"I'll always like yuh, sorrel-top," Tex had said.

They had ridden out of town that night, into a bloody conflict that had lasted four years for them. They had starved and marched through swamps and rain, through sweltering heat and hail. And at no time had they heard a word from Mustang Valley.

Wounded and half dead from exposure, Tex and Chili had been captured. As belligerent prisoners they had been brought before a Captain Strang, a Union officer. Captain Strang had been responsible for them being sent to the prison where they had been forgotten. . . .

Now Delaney finally closed his eyes. Nightmares plagued him and he rolled and tossed. Feverish and sick, he woke with a start. Above the pattering rain on the boat came the distant baying of hounds. Then Chili was awake, his eyes glowing with apprehension.

"Let's go, Chili," Delaney said grimly.

They scrambled out from beneath the scow, shoved it into the water and leaped in.

For hours they hovered near the shoreline, keeping the boat pointed downstream. The rain became a drizzle that fell ceaselessly from a leaden sky. The angry, muddy waves lapped over the bow of the small

scow at times, and both men had to bail with their cupped hands. Then the floating trees and debris swirling along on the breast of the flood were constantly a menace.

Drenched and miserable, both men fought to keep afloat. Delaney's left arm began swelling. Fever mounted in his veins and every movement was agony, but he said nothing. Each mile the tide carried them took him closer to home. Getting back to Texas was all that mattered to him.

Delaney was positive that the Captain Strang mentioned by Starr in her letter was the same Union officer who had sent him and Chili to prison. Delaney and Chili should have been released like the other prisoners of war. But the instant enmity between Delaney and Captain Strang was one of those feelings that rises between men of opposite natures. They had clashed. And Captain Strang, a hater of all Rebels, had had the upper hand.

As night came on, Delaney and Chili made camp in another thicket along the river bank. They drank brackish water to sate their thirst, chewed the juice from wild grapes that Chili found close by. That night Delaney became delirious; he raved and cursed while Chili worked over him.

For three days Delaney had little recollection of what happened. There were long black spells when he knew nothing. Then moments of semi-lucidity when Chili was rebandaging his arm, forcing him to drink hot liquid from a tin cup. But on the fifth day he woke to find his mind clear. He was sunken-eyed and shaky, but his fever was gone. The swelling was out of his arm.

Chili had rigged up a lean-to. There was a small fire burning close by, enough food and extra clothing to supply both men. Chili had on new overalls, and a belt about his waist held a sheathed knife.

"How yuh feels, Tex?" he asked anxiously.

"Fine," Delaney said weakly.

"Then we best be on the goes, Tex. Some mans are lookeeng *por* us."

"Prison guards?"

Chili grinned, shaking his head. "The man wheech owned thees store I breaks into *por* thees supplies. He ees wan mad rooster, p'raps."

WITHOUT asking, Delaney knew that sometime during the past five days Chili had sneaked into a nearby settlement. During the War Chili had learned the art of foraging.

That day they continued floating down the river. Once they saw a river boat and pulled into shore while it passed. The rain had ceased. That night a moon topped the wooded hills.

Several days later they passed Memphis. While the moonlit nights held they went on, sleeping by day. They passed log cabin settlements, heard the chant of Negro roustabouts along loading wharves where huge river boats were being loaded. When their supplies ran low, Delaney rationed them.

"We'll do on what we got till we get to New Orleans," he told Chili. "When we get there we'll try to work our passage on a gulf steamer bound for Galveston."

Delaney was positive that the law would be on the look-out for them. Word had likely spread of their escape. And New Orleans, policed by Union troopers, would have the description of the two fugitives.

They passed Vicksburg in the dead of night. The river grew broader with each passing day. Steamers, their decks loaded high with cotton and cargo, became more numerous, and Delaney became more cautious. When they finally neared New Orleans, they left their scow on the outskirts, waded bayous and timbered swamps into the city.

Darkness was in their favor. Down the dimly lighted, narrow cobbled streets they made their way through the busy throng, past thriving fish markets and stores, beneath long balconies where French girls leaned over the iron rails, jabbering and calling to the passersby below. Tinkling guitars and voices lifted in song. The shouts of vendors and the clatter of horse-drawn traffic added to the hub-bub.

The seething turmoil touched Delaney's nerves with unrest. He avoided the lighted blots along the thoroughfare, cursing the fate that had made him an outcast. All the old bitterness and hate surged anew in him when he and Chili passed within arm's reach of a Union soldier.

Straight for the water-front Delaney headed. There, near the docks, a lighted store-front caught his eyes. He stopped, gripping Chili's arm. Over the door of the building was an illuminated sign that read:

PIERRE LAMONT
Importer
Beef — Hides — Tallow

Delaney stepped into a doorway.

"My guess is that's the Lamont that Starr mentioned, Chili—the Frenchman with holdin's in Mustang Valley back home. He's dealin' in the hides of Texas cattle."

Chili shrugged. *"Quien sabe?"*

A plan flashed into Delaney's mind. Here was chance likely for a passage to Texas. And a chance to learn more about this man Lamont. Yonder at the docks lay two steamers, with roustabouts swarming up and down the gang-planks, carting huge bales of cowhides into a warehouse. Above the clamor of frogs and rattle of traffic came the hiss of escaping steam, the shouts of a steamer captain from the pilot-house.

From out of the gloom came deck-hands, firemen and engineers, their profane shouts all but lost in the confusion. Straight for the nearest saloon they headed. As they passed, Delaney started. He recognized one of the men among them.

"Stoker!" he called guardedly.

One of the noisy men halted as the rest went on. He peered into the dark doorway. Then his face lighted.

"Tex Delaney!" he bellowed. "Chili Cortina. Blast me—"

"Careful, Stoker," Delaney warned. "The law wants us."

"The law? And who, me fine Texas bucko, is the law in this land but the men who are big enough to make it! I wouldn't be believin' me own eyes if I couldn't feel ye. Peeked and gant as scarecrows, both of ye, but filled with fight or my name ain't Stoker McGinnis! Tell me—"

"Where we can be alone, Stoker."

CHAPTER III

Girl of New Orleans

STOKER" McGINNIS was overjoyed. He knew a back alley saloon and led them to it. In a rear room alone, they drank beer and talked for an hour. Stoker was a brawny giant of a man with a round red face and a voice like a foghorn. He would go out of his way to get into a fight.

When the Civil War broke out he had been in New Orleans. He had joined the Confederate forces. If he had been in the North at the time he probably would have joined the Union forces.

In the running battle of Shiloh, Delaney, Chili and Stoker McGinnis had been thrown together. Delaney had saved Stoker's life. And the big Irishman had never forgotten it. Afterward, they had become separated.

"Heard ye and Chili were dead, Tex," he explained.

Briefly, Delaney told him all that had happened. When he asked about Lamont, Stoker wagged his head.

"Don't know much about him, Tex—even if I do work for him, scullin' his smellin' hides out of Texas. Never even seen him. As a fireman on the *Lucy May*, plyin' between here and Rockport on the coast of Texas, I get my pay, work like sin and hear nothin'."

That was about all Stoker McGinnis had to offer, except to say that Pierre Lamont had some tough men working for him, running his exporting office and commanding his boats. Rumor had it that Lamont was aristocratic French, shrewd in business and merciless with his competitors.

"Why was ye wonderin' about him, Tex?" Stoker asked.

"Curiosity as much as anything, Stoker. Mebbe that, mebbe more. Now what are the chances of us stowin' away on yore boat when it leaves?"

"I'll fix it for ye gladly, Tex," Stoker said eagerly.

They made their plans quickly. The *Lucy May* pulled out tomorrow night, plying back to Rockport for another load of hides, Stoker revealed. It would be an easy matter for him to hide Tex and Chili. Until then he knew a cheap lodging where they could stay. He insisted on Delaney accepting some of his money.

Outside, they headed back toward the water-front. As they drew near Lamont's store a buggy whirled past, drawn by a fine team of bay mares. Delaney caught a glimpse of a girl driving. Just then a man lurched out in the pathway of the horses. Too late the girl tried to stop. The man cursed, leaped back, grabbing the horses' reins and jerking them to a standstill.

"I'll learn yuh to run a man down!" He was a bull-necked, bearded sailor. "Women the likes of you with yore high-falutin' finery need puttin' in yore place!"

He lunged back to the carriage as if to yank the girl to the ground. She came to her feet, whip lifted, her face white as death. She struck the man as he grabbed her. As she fell to the cobblestones and the team bolted, Delaney plunged to her side.

Rage, swift and almost blinding, leaped up in Delaney. He didn't hear Stoker's warning shout. The bearded man near the girl's prostrate figure whirled, snarling.

"Keep out of this, cuss yuh!" he roared thickly.

His hand was stabbing to a knife when Delaney's big-knuckled fist caught him between the eyes. The blow whirled the man, sent him sprawling into the gutter. Then men were running toward the scene from all directions. A police whistle blew. Two blue-uniformed troopers came charging around a corner of the dock.

"Run, Tex!" Chili shrieked. "Run for eet!"

In one strong, swift movement, Delaney gathered the unconscious girl up into his arms. Down the street he bolted, whirling into a dark alley to shake pursuit. Back of him shadows churned, a pistol blared, and men yelled. Another black lane opened to his right and he took it, praying his luck would hold.

It led into a street dotted with lights, busy with traffic. With pursuit still dogging him, Delaney broke through the teeming flow of traffic, ducked into another lane and circled a dark building to the front again. A huge portal beckoned. The heavy door gave to his shoulder. He stepped inside, closing the door at his back, breathing hard.

"You are in trouble, my son?" a voice said gently.

DELANEY whirled, the girl still in his arms. He saw the kindly-faced robed priest coming toward him, the rows of seats, the tapers burning on the altar.

"Yes, Father," he murmured. And he quickly related what had happened.

"Come," said the holy man.

He led Delaney through the dimly lighted church into a rear room. When candles were lighted Delaney glanced down at the girl. Her eyes were dark pools in her dead white face. There was a bruised spot on her forehead, where she had fallen to the ground.

"You can let me down now," she said. "I'm all right."

Delaney felt the blood rush to his face as he released her.

"Yuh had some trouble," he said awkwardly. "I fetched yuh here."

She sank into a chair. "I gathered that from what you told Father Poiret a while ago. I was conscious then."

She drank the glass of water the priest offered her, speaking to him fluently in French. He answered her in the same language, smiled, and waddled out of the room. The girl looked up at Delaney, studying his bearded, bitter-lined face with honest candor. A faint smile touched her lips.

"You are not a common ruffian," she said.

"Guess again," Delaney said grimly.

"You intrigue me, *M'sieu.*"

"Whatever that means."

A sparkle came into her dark eyes. "Your drawl hints of Texas."

"That's my home."

"Senor Texas," she murmured.

"It just happens to be Tex—Tex Delaney."

Delaney felt strangely ill at ease. He had never seen a girl just like the one seated before him. Her cool, unruffled poise, her piquant speech, with the faintest accent, marked her of the aristocracy. It spoke of breeding and elegance that lifted her far above the common level. She was beautiful, as a China doll is beautiful—and frail. Yet her lithe body indicated strength and courage and pride.

The candle-light gleamed in her black hair. Her full, ruffled dress, the lacy white collar that sat so trimly about her slender

Delaney and Joan struck the black waters with a jolt
(CHAPTER XVI)

neck hinted of wealth. Delaney found himself comparing her to hoyendish Starr Hoskins. And something stirred inside him.

She rose and moved up to him. In any other girl it might have appeared unduly bold, but with her it was perfectly natural.

"Your eyes give you away, Senor Texas," she said softly. "There's bitterness and hate in them that a woman can read. You have probably just come out of the war. You probably hate me and my kind of people, for while you starved and suffered we managed to have plenty. You saved my life tonight, and for that I want to thank you."

"Forget it."

She shook her head. "No, I never shall. I sent Father Poiret to get word to my own father not to worry about me. Father Poiret christened me when I was a child. You are perfectly safe here, but if you wish to leave—"

"I'd better go," Delaney cut in.

He started to the door, turned. The girl was staring at him, the full flame of her emotions for him to read, her lips parted with unspoken words. Slowly she moved toward him and he stepped forward, drinking in her wistful beauty. Neither of them could have told what was happening. Some strange magnetic force, greater than either of their wills, was drawing them together.

"You'll be going back to Texas, I suppose," she said softly. "Some day, perhaps, we may meet again. My hand is promised to a man in Texas, and some day my father will take me to him." Her eyes were haunted with shadows, but she was smiling. "Goodby, Senor Texas."

Delaney ignored her outstretched hand. Hungrily he reached for her, trembling in every muscle, thrilling to the warmth of her lips against his own. The warm, sweet smell of her hair was like heady wine in his nostrils. He was blind to everything but her loveliness.

WHEN he released her, she drew back, pale and trembling. There was no fear in her wide eyes. Only startled uncertainty.

"Why," she breathed, "why did we do that?"

"I don't even know yore name," he said huskily.

"Jean Lamont."

"Yuh mean—"

"Pierre Lamont is my father," she said tremulously. "You have heard of him?"

"He owns land in Mustang Valley, in Texas. That's my home."

She caught her breath. "Then you must know M'sieu Jacques Chaffee, who manages the ranch there. He is the man I am to marry."

"No, I don't know him. He and your father came into Mustang Valley after I left. I've been gone from there five years."

"War?"

Delaney nodded, his brain rioting with emotions.

"Goodby, Jean," he said queerly.

And with no other word he left her, gently closing the door at his back. He walked through the church and outside like a man suddenly jolted back to unpleasant realities. He tried to concentrate on finding Chili and Stoker McGinnis, but it was hard.

On purely a hunch, he returned to the back alley bar where Stoker had taken them for their conference. There he found Chili waiting for him. Chili was overjoyed. He had tried to follow Delaney after the street fight, but had become lost. He didn't know what had happened to Stoker.

"Stoker is all man and can take care of himself, Chili," Delaney told him. "We're not waitin' until tomorrow night to go back to Texas by boat. We're strikin' out pronto. Come on."

On the outskirts of New Orleans, Delaney and Chili slept the remainder of the night in a barn. At dawn they were up, heading westward on the bayou road around the Gad Luck played into their hands when some high-wheeled freight wagons overtook them. Delaney braced the wagon-train boss for a job. After some parley he and Chili were signed on as gun-guards.

San Antonio was their destination. After two weeks of man-killing labor and hardship, struggling across swollen streams, they made it. From a pock-marked barkeep in the old Buckhorn Bar, Delaney learned what Starr Hoskins meant when she wrote that Texas had changed.

"I'll tell a man Texas ain't what she was once," the barkeep barked. "Yuh're Texas. I can tell by yore talk. Where yuh been since the cussed Yanks and carpet-baggers and tinhorns taken over this country? In jail?"

"Yuh guessed it, mister!" Delaney replied.

"Up North?"

Delaney nodded.

"Where's yore home?"

"Brasada."

"Well, if that's where yuh're headin' yuh're askin' for trouble in big lumps, pardner. Nope, yuh don't need to worry about the law nabbin' yuh—that is, if they're trailin' yuh. This is Texas and they ain't no law here but six-shooter law. These are rocky times. Rocky times. Cows ain't worth nothin' but what yuh can get for their hides and taller, because they're so ganted from runnin' wild all over the state, and money ain't worth the paper it's printed on.

"There ain't no more shippin' because cows got to be rounded up and fattened be-

fore they'll bring anything. With cowmen it's everybody for hisself and the devil take the rump-end. Down in the Brasada cows are driftin' by the thousands an' dyin' like flies. The Skinnin' War is on. Anybody can claim the hide of a fallen cow regardless of the brand. Rustlers are gettin' rich. And that cussed Juan Cortina and his Mexicans are raidin' from across the river."

CHAPTER IV

Death Claims Mustang Valley

WITH the money that Stoker had given him, Delaney took a whirl at monte. He won enough of a stake to buy two horses, gear, and a six-shooter for himself and for Chili Cortina. That evening they headed south.

Around the camp-fire that night, Chili was quieter than usual. His bloodshot eyes were brooding. When Delaney tried to cheer him he wagged his head dolefully.

"I keep theenking my father, Tex—the raids—"

"So far his raids are only hearsay, Chili. And if Juan Cortina *is* makin' 'em, it's not goin' to come between you and me. Nobody could hold you for what yore father might do."

They went on the next day, farther to the southward. They crossed the San Saba and the Llano, the Frio and the muddy Nueces. In front of them lay the Brasada—that wild, tumbled land of mesquite and cholla, live-oak mottes and Spanish dagger. A land beckoning of danger; lawless, renegade-infested and untamed. A disputed land, rich with promise for those with the brawn and courage to claim it.

Home! Delaney thrilled to the smell of the brush, the feel of the thorns against his legs. Yet a psychic sense of danger, a gnawing uneasiness touched his nerves. That feeling grew as they went on.

Still a day's ride from Mustang Valley they made camp. A bitter cold norther sprang up, spitting a little snow. And in his blanket that night, Delaney heard the rumble of hoofs, the smash of brush that told him of wild cattle and mustangs drifting ever southward toward a milder clime.

Next day Delaney set a hard pace, avoiding the few scattered ranchhouses. Night caught him and Chili on a high rim overlooking Mustang Valley. That same uncanny dread sawed at his nerves. A whisper of evil seemed to ride the bitter cold wind. Below them the Valley lay like a black pool, sinister and foreboding. Distant specks of light told of life.

Delaney dipped his horse down the brushy slope, with Chili at his heels. Half-way down they stopped. Both men had their six-shooters palmed. Neither could have explained the strange spell that gripped them. Whisperings came up from the black valley—the pound of hoofs, the creak of gear.

Delaney waited, then went on, riding slowly, eyes stabbing the gloom. He felt his flesh crawl as a nauseous odor filled his nostrils. He knew that terrible stench, the dread of all cowmen. At the toe of the hill he dismounted, stalked through the brush into a clearing. And there he stopped, staring at the ghastly sight before him.

Everywhere lay the skinned carcasses of cattle. Buzzards screamed at the disturbance, flew noisily away from their gluttonous feast. The ground lay littered as far as the eye could see.

With a bitter pang, Delaney returned to his horse. He led the way across the Valley in silence, gloomed by the prospects that faced him. Ahead dismal lamplight shone at the front windows of the Horseshoe ranchhouse. The barn and outbuildings, the pole corrals and windmill took shape in the night, unpainted and badly in need of repair.

Delaney and Chili wheeled up in the yard. A buckboard and team stood near the front door. They dismounted, and Chili took the reins of both horses.

"I'll wait een thees shed, Tex," he said softly.

Delaney knew how the Mexican felt. He nodded, strode swiftly toward the gallery. Poignant memories smashed at him as he opened the door and stepped into the front room. A lamp burned on a table in the center of the room. Logs flamed and crackled in the huge rock fireplace. There was the same horsehair furniture, the same faded pictures upon the log walls.

In the palpitating silence, Delaney called: "Dad?"

There was no answer. In long strides, he crossed the room to a gloomy corridor that led to his father's room. A tall, stringy-necked man with bug eyes and a bald head suddenly blocked his way. Delaney recognized the man as Doc Tidwell, of Mosquero.

"Where's Dad, Doc?" Delaney snapped.

The tall medico started visibly.

"Tex! Where did you come from? I thought you were dead."

Delaney didn't take time to explain. That could wait. He had always liked this kindly old medico who had been a good friend of his father's

"Yore pa is dead, Tex," Doc Tidwell murmured deeply.

Shock tore through Delaney. Not the blinding grief that he might have felt, but a terrible hurt. Even though they had not seen things in the same light, Delaney had loved his father, respected him.

IN THE doorway of his father's room he paused, a hard lump rising up in his throat. Frank Delaney lay in bed, a blanket covering his body. Dismal lamplight cast shadows across the stern features that were white in death. His right hand lay across his chest, clutching an old tintype in his fingers.

Hat in hand, Delaney's spurs jingled as he knelt at the bedside. He didn't turn as the old medico moved up beside him. Eyes filled with mist, he saw that the picture was one snapped in Mosquero, years ago. It was the faded picture of a tousel-haired barefoot boy in overalls.

"The last thing he asked for was your picture, Tex," Doc Tidwell said gloomily.

After a time Delaney said, "When did he die, Doc?"

"About two hours ago."

"What was the matter with him?"

Doc Tidwell said slowly, "He was murdered, Tex."

Delaney got to his feet. Steely fingers seemed to be plucking at his heart. He saw the haunting fear in the medico's bulging eyes—the same look that he was to find in the eyes of other men on this stricken range. And rage, deeper than his grief, ripped through Delaney.

"Who did it, Doc?" he gritted hoarsely.

"I don't know, Tex," Doc Tidwell moaned. "Don't know."

All he knew was that he had driven out here about an hour ago, from town. He often visited Frank Delaney of a night. When he had driven up in the yard he found the oldster lying on the gallery in a pool of blood. Doc Tidwell had carried the dying man inside, had done all possible to save him.

"All your pa could say was that a man rode up just at dark. When Frank went out to meet him the man fired from the dark and spurred off."

Delaney barely heard the rest of the feeble explanation. Doc Tidwell was frightened. So many killings had taken place lately. No one could be trusted. He said he would spread the word of what had happened. Pill-bag in hand, he went out to his buckboard, climbed in and drove away as fast as his horses would carry him.

Delaney went back to his father's bedside. There he knelt again, his gaunt face hard, eyes bitter.

"Good huntin', Dad," he said huskily. "I take the blame for us not gettin' along better, but I'll make up for it somehow. This is my home and I aim to keep it as such—come what may. I'll find the snake that killed yuh and square with him if it's the last thing I ever do."

He rose, covering his dead sire's face with the blanket. When he turned he saw Chili standing in the doorway, his eyes shadowed with kindred emotions. Chili had sneaked in through the kitchen door. He had heard all Doc Tidwell said.

"I'd like to stay here weeth yuh a while, Tex," he said queerly.

"Yuh're welcome, Chili. Yuh may be lettin' yoreself in for a lot of trouble, but make yoreself at home."

Delaney went to the kitchen, lighted a lantern. He went out in the front yard, began pacing up and down in the darkness, studying the ground. In the fringe of gnarled mesquite trees he suddenly stopped. A horse's hoofs had dug into the turf. Close by a shiny object caught his eye.

Quickly he stooped, picked it up. It was an empty brass cartridge—a .45. When Chili joined him he said grimly:

"The bushwhacker made no effort to hide his sign, Chili. Here's the empty shell."

The little Mexican said nothing. But Delaney knew their thoughts were the same. Army men were issued this old type of cartridge for their Colts. Brush-poppers and ranchers, as a rule, carried .41s and .44s.

Finally Chili said, "Yuh theenk—"

"This Captain Strang gent that Starr mentioned needs some investigatin', Chili. Mebbe I'm barkin' up the wrong tree. But there's somethin' almighty funny about this. Keep a tight lip and say nothin' to anybody."

They returned to the house. While Chili was making coffee over the kitchen stove, several neighboring ranchers rode up. Doc Tidwell had spread the word of the murder. He had told them of Delaney's return.

They tramped upon the gallery, a gun-heeled, grim-faced lot—cowmen of the old school. Men who had heard the deathless cry of the Alamo, brush-scarred and tough as the gnarled oaks that dotted their ranch lands, but kindly. Men bewildered, puzzled, plagued by the riotous killings and bloodshed about them—looking to someone to lead them, now that big Frank Delaney was dead. Men with the haunted look of disaster in their eyes.

AMONG them was DeWitt Edgerton and "Mossy" Cooper, Sandy McPherson, "Long John" Pike and Lane Newberry. Strapping men as much alike in build and manners as the center-fire saddles they rode. They wore long leather leggins, scarred boots, big hats and thick woolen shirts. Brush-poppers!

And with them was Starr's father, Bowie

Hoskins, a sheriff's star pinned to his shirt front.

Their greetings were the same, the simple greetings of strong men of the Frontier. Their handclasps were firm.

"Howdy, Tex. Glad yuh're back."

They saw in Tex Delaney not the grinning, devil-may-care kid who had run off to war five years ago, but a powerfully built, wide-shouldered man whose passions had been tempered, whose eyes spoke eloquently of suffering and hate—a man with all the qualities of leadership that his father had possessed.

They offered no profuse sympathies, and Delaney was glad.

Morosely, Mossy Cooper of the Bridle Bit outfit, said:

"We was mighty glad to hear yuh're still alive, Tex. Our hope is that yuh'll go ahead with the Hoss-shoe and make it the spread yore pa had hopes of it bein'. There's trouble ahead of us, but if we stick together there's hopes of us pullin' out."

The friendship and loyalty of these men stirred something inside of Delaney that was almost dead. When he saw a chance he took Bowie Hoskins out to the barn where they could be alone. A hundred questions beat at Delaney.

"Now tell me, Bowie," Delaney said, "about Starr. Is she—"

"Whoa up, son. Let's start at the first. Where's Chili Cortina?"

"Back at the house. Why?"

"Did he come back with yuh?"

"Yes."

"Do yuh figger yuh can trust him?"

Delaney's eyes slitted. "I don't know what yuh're drivin' at, Bowie. But I do know that I can trust Chili with my life."

Bowie Hoskins' actions puzzled him. Of all the men in the valley, this seamy-faced, tobacco-chewing oldster had been closer to him than any of them.

Bowie, owner of a shirt-tail cow outfit near Mosquero, was the sole parent of a large brood of children. His wife had died eight years ago of pneumonia, leaving him with more than he could do. Much of the work had fallen to Starr, who had rebelled at such drudgery. Reared in such poverty it was only natural that she should have longed for the nicer things of life.

Now Bowie hitched up his sagging guns, ill at ease. He looked at Delaney, his eyes those of a doomed man.

"Tex," he began, "don't get riled at anything I say. Before I explain a thing I wish yuh'd tell me about yoreself."

Delaney told him in as few words as possible all that had happened since the night he had ridden out of Mosquero to join General Lee's forces.

"Yuh got Starr's letter?" Bowie asked.

"Yuh know about her writin'?"

"She told me about it, but begged me to tell nobody. There's perdition loose in the valley, son. That's why I asked yuh about Chili. I never held ary thing agin him, but his bean-eatin' old man is on the rampage. He hides out in a little settlement across the river with as back-stabbin' a bunch of cutthroats as the Border ever spawned.

"Then there's Lamont and his gun-totin' crew to contend with. He's a French fur-riner, Tex—a big gent with as smooth a line of talk as ever yuh heard. His foreman is just the opposite—squatty an' dangerous as a coiled rattler. Durin' the War, Lamont sneaked in here and bought up all the east end of the valley for a song. He's got power and money behind him, boats plyin' in the Gulf, holdin's in New Orleans and a freight line in the makin' between here an' Rockport.

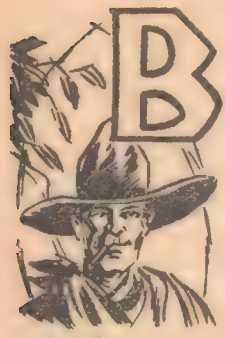
"If I'm any reader of sign, Tex, this Lamont is schemin' to own the whole danged Valley, and is playin' a waitin' game to get it. You'll *sabe* what I mean when yuh been here a month. There's been a drouth here

[*Turn page*]

the past year. Cattle are dyin' by the thousands. And them that's alive are driftin' fast."

CHAPTER V

For Their Hides and Tallow



BOWIE HOSKINS talked on, words low and tense. He told how the ranchers were killing cattle for their hides and tallow. Beef itself was being fed to the buzzards. In Rockport hides were worth seven dollars apiece. Anybody could skin a fallen cow. There was no law. Nothing he could do could stop the bushwhackings and raids.

In order to survive, the Mustang Valley ranchers had formed a pool. Despite the feeling against him, Pierre Lamont had joined. Shrewdly, tactfully, he was trying to work himself into the good graces of the smaller ranchers around him. Lamont owned a hide and tallow factory in Rockport. He was one of the biggest buyer of hides in Texas. Much of the time Lamont was gone from the ranch, leaving full charge to his foreman, Jacques Chaffee.

"And the Union troopers," Delaney asked. "What are they doin' here?"

Bowie snorted disgustedly. "The Government sent a company of Yanks down to police the Border, Tex. Sent 'em down here to keep Injuns, Mexicans and renegades off our necks. And all they're doin' is raisin' ruckuses theirselves. Texas is a mighty big state. If it's to be tamed it's up to us folks to do it."

Delaney's mind whirled. He knew Bowie was holding something from him.

"What about this Captain Strang, Bowie?"

Bowie Hoskins looked away. "I hate him, Tex."

"Would *he* have any reason for killin' Dad?"

Bowie started. "None that I can think of, Tex. Strang is rotten plumb through. I happen to know that when his Army hitch is up he aims to go into the ranchin' business. Why?"

"I was just wonderin' about him," Delaney said grimly.

"Yuh're safe down here in Texas, son. If the Yanks want yuh they'll play hob gettin' yuh. It's a different brand of law down here. I'll work with yuh all I can to find out who killed yore Pa."

"Yuh haven't mentioned Starr, Bowie. How is she?"

Bowie's shoulders sagged as if all the life's blood were draining out of his body.

"Don't hold it agin her, Tex. Mebbe I'm to blame in not bein' the father to her I should have been. She—"

"Tell me!" Delaney snapped.

"When word reached us that you was dead Starr run off and got married, son."

"Who to?"

"Captain Strang!"

For a long moment Delaney stood stunned. Torn with the agony of memories and the bitter future ahead, he returned to the house. He could feel only pity for the forlorn old lawman. It had been a terrible blow to Bowie—Starr's marrying a worthless Yankee Army captain.

Some of the ranchers stayed the night through. Others rode back to their spreads, to return the next day. Delaney went to the back room that had been his. He and Chili slept until shortly after dawn, then faced the grim chore that confronted them.

Delaney found it hard to plan. He thought of Lamont—and of Jean, whom he had kissed that night in the church. With a start he suddenly realized that her image had been with him constantly. He thought of what Bowie had told him of Juan Cortina, Chili's father, who was raiding in the valley. And Captain Strang, Starr's husband. He kept the empty cartridge in his pocket and showed it to no one.

That afternoon, under leaden skies, they buried Frank Delaney on the knoll beside the grave of Delaney's mother. Practically every rancher in the Valley was present. Lamont and his tough crew, Delaney noted, were absent. Nor was Starr there. Sheriff Bowie Hoskins came alone, his shoulders bent with tragedy.

It was a simple ceremony, conducted by the long-legged sky-pilot from Mosquero. His words sounded strained and inadequate as he quoted Scripture. The men and women stood with bowed heads, and the frightened kids stared as the first clod of dirt was tossed in upon the pine-box coffin.

" 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,' " the parson intoned. " 'Blessed be the name of the Lord.' "

There were no tears; no eulogies. Death had struck once more in Mustang Valley. It would strike again. Grim-faced men led their toil-bent wives and children back to the buckboards in the yard. Rocky times in Texas. Rocky times.

THAT night a skift of snow fell, whirling out of the north on a roaring, icy cold wind. Delaney and Chili were up early, eating from the scant supplies in the kitchen. Try as he would Delaney couldn't shake off

the spell of depression that gripped him. In hard toil he hoped to find solace—and his own salvation. He had dedicated his life to finding the murderer of his father. That, and holding on to the ranch was all that mattered to him.

All that day he and Chili bucked the blasting gale, doing a job that was like gall and wormwood to them both. In ravines and timbered slots they found Horseshoe cattle where they had been trampled, or frozen to death. Chili, an expert with the knife, did most of the skinning.

Toward noon, Sheriff Hoskins and Long John Pike rode up where they were working.

"I know yuh don't like it, Tex," Pike muttered. "But it's the only chance we got pullin' through the winter. Mebbe beef prices will go up by next spring. Mebbe we can fatten up enough cows to ship again."

"This ain't the cow business," Delaney remarked acridly. "It's worse than a slaughterhouse chore. I hate it!"

"It's our only chance," Pike said sadly.

Delaney knew that. And for that reason alone he went ahead with the unpleasant task. According to Bowie last night, Delaney knew his father had left no money behind. Nothing. Only the ranch and the few Horseshoe cattle that hadn't drifted.

He and Chili strung the hides up in the barn to dry. From the other Valley ranchers Delaney learned how to cure them, tie them in huge bales. They worked from daylight until dark, but at no time did Delaney find surcease from his thoughts. He found carcasses where someone else had already stripped the hides from his cattle. He found sign where many of his longhorns had either drifted or had been driven away.

A gloomy hush settled over Mustang Valley. Bowie reported no raids, no bushwhackings. But it was like the tense, danger-fraught silence that precedes a storm. Fear was in the eyes of the Valley men. They packed their guns, ever on the alert, and said little.

Delaney avoided Mosquero town. Starr had purposefully avoided him, and he had no desire to see her for the time being. Savagely he flung himself into the work of salvaging all the hides possible. It helped salve his hate; helped quiet the insistent tugging of unrest that roweled his soul.

A week passed. That night Bowie, DeWitt Edgerton, Mossy Cooper and Long John Pike rode up. Bowie acted as the spokesman. He told of the pool men's plans. They had to have money to see them through the winter. The only market for their hides was in Rockport, along the Gulf. To send individual wagons through was only asking for trouble from the renegades that infested the trail.

"We plan to pool our wagons and go through in a train, Tex. In numbers we'll find safety. As a boy yuh went with yore pa over every foot of that trail. You know what it means to fight. We want yuh to throw in with us and go as wagon-boss, Tex."

"That's a lot of responsibility to put on one man, gents," Delaney said slowly.

"We wouldn't be askin' yuh," Pike said, "unless we knowed we could trust yuh. Yuh don't need to give us yore answer now. Think it over. And come to the meetin' we're holdin' at Bowie's house tomorrow night."

"Will Lamont be there?"

"He aims to come," Bowie said, wincing. "It's kind of his idea that we all go together."

Bowie didn't reveal that Lamont had instigated the whole plan. Before they left, Delaney said:

"I'll be at the meetin' and let yuh know then."

Next day Delaney was working the brakes along the dry creek bed that adjoined the Horseshoe. From a hilltop he caught a glimpse of the distant buildings of Lamont's ranch. The buildings and corrals were in the finest repair. Every sign pointed to wealth.

Delaney thought of Jean. Turning, he dipped his horse down a brushy slope. A quarter mile farther on he came to the edge of a small clearing—and stopped! Two men were bent over a fallen Horseshoe steer. One of them had a knife in hand, skinning it. Off to one side stood their rein-trailed horses, bearing Lamont's Circle-L brand.

RAGE ripped through Delaney. He dismounted, striding forward. At the jangle of his spurs the two men looked up, startled. Delaney's gun leaped into his fist, menacing the beef-skinners.

"When the cow business *was* the cow business," he grated, "we shot rustlers, or hung them. Keep yore hands away from yore gun, squatty, or I'll drive a bullet through yore brisket!"

Both men straightened, a tinge of fear flicking into their eyes. From all he had heard, Delaney knew the squat man was Jacques Chaffee, the Circle L foreman. He had the black hair and swart skin of an Indian, but his eyes were dead and colorless pools that contrasted strangely.

Patently there was mixed blood in the man. Squat, thick-chested and powerfully built, he stood like a gorilla, thick lips pulled back in a sneer. A slouchy black hat was pulled low over his eyes. His ducking jacket and leather leggins were scarred.

The man with Chaffee was a tall, blundering brute, with the low-swung guns and expressionless face of a killer. A scar raced

the full length of one cheek, giving his features a distorted look. In his right hand was the skinning knife, dripping blood.

"That's the big he-coon we been hearin' about, Chaffee," he chortled mirthlessly.

"Shut up, Chino," Chafflee growled. He kept his eyes on Delaney. "We heard yuh busted prison, Delaney. Why the bellyachin' and the big gun?"

Delaney said icily, "The Hoss-shoe boundary is on the other side of the crick, Chaffee. There's likely enough dead stuff bearin' the Lamont brand for yuh to work on over there. That cow yuh're skinnin' is wearin' the Hoss-shoe brand. Now light a shuck!"

"Ringy, huh?" Chaffee smirked, not moving.

"Yuh heard me."

"We been hearin yuh might prove tough, Delaney. That's the way us Circle L boys like 'em. Fallen beef hides go to the first gent to skin 'em off. That's the unwritten law, and I reckon it'll stay that way. Shuck yore gun an' I'll learn it to yuh—with my bare hands. Chino here won't lift a hand. Only me."

Delaney's face didn't lose its icy mold. But all the torment and the agony of the past few weeks boiled up in him in an angry froth. He accepted the challenge with a slow drawl.

"Slip off yore guns then, Chaffee. If that's the way yuh feel there's no better time than the present."

Wearily, Delaney holstered his gun, unbuckled the belt and tossed it to the ground as Chaffee followed suit. He knew he was taking a desperate chance. But all his life, it seemed, he had bucked the odds.

Off to one side, Chino stood with the bloody knife still in his hands, grinning. Stripped of his guns and coat, Chaffee swaggered forward, huge fists knotted, confident. Obviously he was a rough-and-tumble fighter who barred no holds. Kick, stamp and gouge were his tactics.

"Ready, Mr. Delaney?" he taunted.

"Come and get it, Chaffee!"

Chaffee came, charging like a bull—and just as fast and furious. Coolly Delaney stepped back, sent a straight-arm right through the man's guard that jerked his head up and suddenly brought blood to his lips. Surprise leaped into Chaffee's faded eyes, but he whirled and charged again. And again Delaney drove him back with a smashing right that would have felled a steer.

In the Army, Delaney had spent all his spare time learning the art of boxing. He had learned to dodge, duck and feint. He had learned the importance of fast, accurate footwork and timing. It puzzled Chaffee, blackened his face with bewildered fury. He had fought men twice his size, downed them, and then kicked their ribs in. He could crush a man in a bearhug, so powerful were his arms.

"Stand still, cuss yuh!" he panted furiously.

"Yuh asked for it, Chaffee." Delaney grinned.

"Stand still!"

Delaney stood still—too long. Chaffee came in fast, both arms driving like pistons, snarling as Delaney's chopping blows cut his face. Delaney's arms were up, his guard momentarily broken. Chaffee's knee came up into Delaney's thigh, tearing a sob of agony from him. Delaney bent, face writhing and white. Chaffee unloosed a haymaker into his face that crashed like a pistol shot.

The world suddenly exploded in front of Delaney's eyes in a red burst of fire. He reeled back, tripped and fell, every fibre of his body screaming with pain. His ears roared. There was blood and dirt in his mouth.

Senses reeling he rolled as Chaffee came at him to stamp and kick. Then he crawled to his feet, reeling like a drunken man.

"Yuh dirty, low-life son!" he gritted.

CHAPTER VI

A Prayer For Help

THROUGH a hazy blur Delaney saw Chaffee's smirking face coming toward him. Sobbing for breath, he ducked and dodged, trying to recoup his strength. It was go on or die, and he knew it. Chaffee had baited him into the trap to kill him. And even if Delaney won there was the gunman Chino.

Twice Delaney saw his chance and drove through terrific rights. He feinted and swayed, employing every boxing tactic and all the skill he knew. Hope surged through him as Chaffee began tiring. The Circle L man was blowing, his face cut and bleeding. One eye was swelling. Once he went down and came up, raging thickly:

"Gun him, Chino! He's too much fer me!"

"Like he said, yuh asked for it, Chaffee," Chino chortled.

Delaney laughed as they came together. Toe to toe they stood, swapping sledgehammer blows that would have downed most men. But Delaney's six feet of whang and barb-wire took it, and dished out more.

He rocked Chaffee back on his heels, followed through with rights and lefts. With a wild, frantic look, the Circle L man backtracked. Then Delaney dropped him.

Chaffee didn't come up from that last blow. He fell flat on his back, nose broken, eyes blacked and swart face bloody. Delaney turned, trembling and exhausted, to face the other man. Chino, his scarred face still expressionless, had not moved. Something akin to admiration flicked into his eyes.

"I guess them folks that said yuh was tough wasn't lyin', Delaney," he said. "I ain't got no crow to pick with yuh right now. Chaffee asked for his beatin'. There bein' no marbles to pick up, I'll rouse Chaffee and go home."

Delaney walked tiredly back to where his gun and belt lay on the ground. Strapping the belt about his waist, and pulling on his ducking jacket, he went to his horse and mounted. From there he watched Chino lug his foreman's limp body to one of the horses, throng him across the saddle. Then Chino mounted the other animal, held the reins of the unconscious man's horse and rode off into the brush.

Delaney jogged back toward the Horseshoe ranchhouse. Tomorrow he would send Chili down for the hide.

Another wintry evening was casting gloomy shadows across the great expanse of Mustang Valley. Here and there in the patches of brush lay thin blankets of snow. From the thickening storm-heads more snow was in the offing.

Restlessness and discontent struck at Delaney deeper than his hurt. This range was his home; he loved it. Once he had known peace and happiness here, but those joys eluded him now. The future was blacker than he had ever known it. He had made a deadly enemy out of Jacques Chaffee tonight. And Chaffee was not a man to forget a grudge.

In the shed Delaney unrigged his horse, fed the stock and turned toward the dark house, wondering about Chili. In the kitchen he lighted a lamp, got arnica and water and bathed his cut face. He was sore and stiff, but the agonizing pain in his thigh had lessened.

On a table in the front room he found a pencil-scrawled note with Chili's name signed to it.

Tex:

I am going to works the north end of the valley an maybe it will be late when I returns.

Chili

Delaney made a pot of coffee, drank what he wanted and left the rest on the kitchen stove for Chili. Then he returned to the shed, saddled and started off down the rutted wagon road toward Mosquero.

He couldn't stall the urge to see Starr any longer. It wasn't like her to avoid him, even if she was married. If Captain Strang was with her it might give Delaney a chance to clear up a lot of things. Strange that Captain Strang, representative of military law in the Brasada, had made no move toward Delaney and Chili, both of whom were fugitives.

"Get along, bronc," he said softly. "While we're askin' for trouble let's ask for it in big lumps. . . ."

MOSQUERO town lay at the south end of Mustang Valley, at the toe of the tumbled, brush-dotted hills. There was one main street with a side road that angled through a slot in the hills toward the Rio Grande. For weeks on end the mud was hub-deep and all but impassable.

The false-fronted stores in the center of town all looked alike, unpainted, weather-beaten structures with hitch-racks along the plank walks. "Bottles" Lawrence, a little man with a bulbous red nose, owned the main saloon and did a little horse trading on the side. Next to his place was the saddle-shop, then the barber shop, and the Lone Star Restaurant.

Doc Tidwell had his office across the street above the general merchandise store, and the sheriff's office was next door. Sam Whitehead, owner of the store, Doc Tidwell, Parson Cripps and Sheriff Bowie Hoskins were friends of long standing. They would sit outside on the wooden bench during the summer, dozing in the sun and talking.

The houses in Mosquero stood along the street, one after the other. There were black-barked mesquite trees in the yards and lace curtains at the windows. Most of the menfolks worked on nearby ranches, drank a little of Saturday nights and went to Parson Cripps' church on Sunday. The women, calico-clad and toil-bent, held a weekly sewing circle at various homes and wondered why the long-legged parson had never married.

Parson Cripps' rough plank church was at the edge of town. Back of it was a small cemetery. Beyond it the high black mesquite stretched as far as the eye could see. The parson was a genial man with sad, watery eyes and stiltlike legs. He believed in the infinite goodness of God and mankind, wore a long-tailed black coat, and rode a mule on his sick calls. He lived in a small frame house at the side of the church, which the ladies of the sewing circle had decorated for him.

After the war things had changed in Mosquero. A small Army post was established in the brush just south of town. Log quarters, a mess hall and a guard-house were built. Word was that this company of bluecoats, under the command of Captain Strang, had been sent here to protect and guard the Border. But since their coming lawlessness had increased.

The townspeople openly resented the presence of this military. The ladies of the sewing circle told of seeing some of the bluecoats drunk, of other women being rudely accosted by some of the soldiers. According to their husbands, they said, Captain Strang was making no effort to establish peace and security.

Most of the time he spent in Bottles Lawrence's saloon, drinking. It was an outrage the way he carried on. And him marrying Starr Hoskins! She was far too good for him, even if she had been inclined to be skittish when younger.

Sheriff Hoskins shook his head hopelessly when the trouble grew worse. There was nothing he could do about it. He pitied Starr for the mistake she had made in marrying Captain Strang, and visited her whenever he could.

No one liked Strang. Everyone feared Pierre Lamont and his tough crew.

"Somethin' bad's goin' to happen," Sam Whitehead predicted mournfully. "Ain't goin' to be nothin' left of this here valley. The drouth and cattle driftin', bushwhackin's and queer things happenin'. Lamont is grabbin' onto all the land and his men is stealin' hides. Lamont's a bad 'un, I tell yuh. Strang struttin' around in his uniform. I seen their kind durin' the War."

And of Sundays, Parson Cripps preached of tolerance and love and unity.

Rocky times in Texas. Rocky times. . .

The dreary wintry night closed in on Mosquero. The muted undertone of the town was lost in the whine of the wind. Lamplight glowed from the windows of some of the stores.

When the last customer left the Lone Star Restaurant, the girl who had been Starr Hoskins locked the front door, blew out the lamp and went quickly to a room in the rear, off the kitchen. It was a small room, furnished with a girl's neat taste. There were a dresser, a bed and a table, with a wood stove in the corner.

For the past month, Starr had made her home back here, too proud to return home. For a moment she stopped before the dresser mirror. She pushed back her copper-colored hair. There was a tired look in her eyes that made her look older than her twenty-three years. A sob caught in her throat.

SHE went to the table and finished writing a letter that she had started that morning. It was addressed to someone in St. Louis and said:

Dear Aunt Sarah:

Thanks for your last letter, asking me to come live with you and Uncle Fred. I believe I'll take you up. I can't stand it here much longer. It's the loneliness, I guess, and the smell of things dying—

She paused, glancing up as the knob of the outer door started turning. Quickly she stuffed the unfinished letter into the bosom of her dress. She rose as the door creaked inward and the lamp sputtered and a man stepped into the portal, kicking the door closed behind him.

Starr's voice was flat, cold. "What do you want, Lew?"

Captain Lew Strang stood there, white and grim and coldly sneering, his service hat cocked at a rakish angle, his long coat damp with melting snow. He was handsome, after a fashion, tall and beady-eyed. He reveled in his own power and enjoyed his vices with unmasked relish.

"I'm taking you back to quarters, Starr," he said.

"We've been through all that, Lew," she said patiently.

"Then I'm taking you back by force!"

She smelled the whisky on his breath as he advanced toward her. But she faced him splendidly cool and unafraid, her chest heaving from the fires of her loathing.

"Don't touch me, Lew!" she warned huskily. "I hate you with every ounce of my being! Oh, what a blind fool I was when I married you! You promised to take me away from here, and I believed you. You promised me everything a girl could want—"

"I changed my mind, Starr," Strang grated. "I see big possibilities here in Mustang Valley. This trouble is not going to last forever."

"You haven't got enough of the courage it takes to go on living in this country, Lew. Take off that uniform and you're a drunken tramp. If folks knew just how rotten you were they'd hang you!"

Captain Strang's eyes smoldered with rage. He bit his lips.

"Still thinking of Tex Delaney, sweetheart?" he drawled.

"I'll always think of Tex Delaney, Lew!" Starr flared. "He's as fine and good as you are bad!"

"You're going to listen to me, Starr, or I'll have him shipped back to prison. If you don't think I got the power to do it, try me! You're going back to the quarters I've got fixed up for you. You begged me to leave Delaney alone and I've done it for your sake.

Now you're going to listen to me. Or, by thunder, I'll kill you!"

Starr paled just the slightest. "Then kill me! For I'm not going back!"

Strang's right hand flashed out. He struck Starr across the cheek, flinging her back against the wall. She made no outcry. She knew she was no match for him physically. She had tried that before. Eyes flashing with all the venom a woman can know, she said: "You filthy cur!"

Strang smiled thinly. "Be ready in an hour, Starr. I'm closing up this place for you and taking you back with me. I'll be back for you in an hour."

With that he walked out, closing the door at his back. Starr remained standing against the wall, her arms spread, eyes flooded with suffering and hate. Then the tears came. She looked pitifully small, just standing there. There was a hollowness about her eyes, a dazed, hurt look.

After a time her lips moved in a whispered prayer for help.

CHAPTER VII

Dead Man's Return

OUTSIDE a wintry moon rose higher and higher, casting its dismal glow upon the stricken range, with its odor of dead things, not so far north of the sluggish Rio Grande. Lights blinked out in the houses that flanked the main street, and the wind wailed louder, whining through the brush outside like the voices of dying men.

Starr stood listening. For the first time in her life she knew the meaning of fear. Minutes passed. Then, above the sound of the wind, she thought she heard the sound of a slow-moving horse. When the sound died a kind of limpness came over her.

She closed her eyes. When she opened them she heard the gentle knock on the door.

"Come in," she said weakly.

The door opened and closed, and a man stood across the room from her. Their eyes met and held, and in a ghostly whisper of gladness, Starr said:

"Tex! Tex!"

She moved toward him, and he came to meet her. She saw the cuts on his face. She saw how he had changed. And with her woman's intuition she sensed the fierce battle that was raging inside him.

He had his hat in his hand. "Howdy, Starr," he said in a strained way.

"You knew I lived here?" she asked.

"Yore father told me."

They fell silent. Words were such futile things. They were together with their memories that weren't pleasant. There was a barrier between them. Both had changed. And both were trying to think of the right thing to say.

"Lived here long, Starr?" he asked.

"About a month."

"Alone?"

She nodded.

"Where's—yore husband?"

"At the Army Post."

Another awkward pause. He said, "I had to see yuh, Starr."

"I'm glad you came. Only you'd better go now. Come back later. You see, he's coming for me."

"Strang?"

"Yes."

Delaney read the misery in her eyes. Pity touched him. He knew now that he had never loved Starr Hoskins. Nor she him. Love could not have died so quickly. Theirs had been a devotion that exists between brother and sister.

"*Bueno*, Starr," he said softly. "I'll go, but I'll be back. Mebbe yuh can help me. I got back in time to find Dad dead—murdered. I'm goin' to run the man down that did it if I have to trail him through all the fires of Hades!"

"Tex, listen!" she pleaded tensely. "I'll do anything to help you. I know the battle you're fighting! Only—"

"What, Starr?"

Her emotions broke then. "I can't stand it here any longer, Tex. I'm leaving—going to live with my aunt in St. Louis. Don't tell a soul, please! I don't even want Dad to know. You're not blind. You must know that I hate the man I married. I only did it after word came that you were dead. You'll never understand—"

"I think I understand everything, Starr."

"Captain Strang hates you. He's got ambitions to be a mighty rancher, like Lamont. And he'll do anything to gain what he wants—lie, steal, even kill. I believe he'd do that. They talk of Cortina's raids. He has made raids in the past, but they didn't amount to anything. It's men like Strang and Lamont that you'll have to watch."

"What do you mean, Starr?"

"I can't explain now, Tex! Just believe me. Oh, maybe I'm hysterical tonight—I don't know. But do this for me: Please, please, take care of Dad. He needs help and guidance, and I've failed him. Don't let him lose the ranch. Don't let my kid sisters and brothers out there at the ranch starve. Will

you promise to look out for him when I'm gone, Tex?"

"I promise, Starr."

Tears brimmed in her eyes. Her lips trembled.

"Thanks, Tex," she said. "Thanks."

He turned to go.

"One more favor, cowboy."

He forced a grin. "What's that, sorrel-top?"

"Kiss me."

HE BENT and kissed her. He felt the chill draft and turned. Neither of them had heard the door open. Captain Strang stood there facing them, lips twisted in a cold smile.

"No introductions are necessary, Starr," he purred. "Your lover and I have met before."

His smile dropped. Face working with feline savagery, he started forward, right hand dropping to the butt of the holstered pistol beneath his coat. Catlike quick, Delaney lashed out with his fist, catching Strang between the eyes. He crashed back against the door and slumped to the floor, the pistol clattering to the planks beside him.

Delaney stepped over to him, scooped up the pistol. It was a .45 Colt single-action, Frontier model. He jacked out a bullet. It was identical to the empty shell he had in his pocket! Ugly suspicions beat at him. Brain afire with rioting emotions, he turned toward the stark-eyed girl, handed her the gun.

"Keep this for him, Starr," he rapped. "Get me a cold wash rag and I'll fetch him around."

"I'll do that, Tex. You'd better leave."

"You can handle him?"

"I can handle any of them, Tex. You know I've always been able to take care of myself. Tonight you taught me how to fight. I'd almost forgotten how. You go on. I'll fetch him around and if he gets tough I'll give him a mate to the one you just gave him. *Adios,* cowboy!"

She was laughing and crying at the same time when Delaney left. She heard him ride away, walked over to the bed and sat down, the six-shooter dangling from her hands. Captain Strang moaned, stirred, and opened his eyes. He looked at Starr a long time, and what he saw in her eyes must have warned him.

"Where did he go?" he snarled hoarsely.

"Who?" she asked innocently.

"You know who I mean!" he roared.

"I don't know, Lew."

Strang's face bloated with fury. His eyes glowed feverishly. Slowly he climbed to his feet.

"Give me that gun!" he said thickly.

Starr smiled coldly. "This is one piece of Government property that I'm keeping, Lew. Tex Delaney opened my eyes tonight to how weak I've been. From here out I continue to go my own way and you yours. But I'm warning you—if you make any trouble for Tex I swear I—I'll kill you! Now get out!"

Face twitching and deadly white, Strang departed with no other word, slamming the door at his back. It would be several days before his swollen eye was normal again. Starr locked the door behind him and blew out the light. Then she flopped across the bed and wept. . . .

Delaney left the scattered lights of Mosquero town behind, guiding his horse along the brush-fringed road that angled to Sheriff Hoskins' ranch. The lawman's little place, centrally located in the Valley, had always been a meeting place for the cowmen. And since the death of Delaney's father the mantle of leadership had patently fallen to Bowie Hoskins.

Delaney was plunged into a painful turmoil of cross currents as he considered Starr's plight. The more he probed his own predicament the more confusing it seemed. There was the constant threat of a raid by Juan Cortina. If rumor was true, Cortina and his band were in the business of stealing hides and freighting them through to the Gulf Coast on the Mexican side of the river.

Then there was Captain Strang and the bristling resentment he and the Union troopers had caused. The bullets in Strang's gun were identical to the one that had killed Frank Delaney. Suspicion lay strong in Delaney against Strang. The Army man had openly boasted that he wanted a ranch in Mustang Valley. There was a chance that in killing Frank Delaney he had seen an opportunity of gaining ownership of the Horseshoe outfit.

In his encounter with Chaffee and the other tough Circle L man, Delaney had been quick to notice the guns they packed. Both men's guns were .44's, Delaney was sure.

Lights of Hoskins' Leaning H ranchhouse suddenly glimmered in the black night ahead. Snow still came slanting down on the bitter cold wind, rapidly turning to sleet as the temperature dropped.

Bowie Hoskins' cabin was a sprawling structure of roughhewn logs. He had hauled the timber down out of the hills, adding more rooms as needed. He had a truck patch in the rear and some fruit trees, which helped supply the needs of his children. By butchering his own beef and being frugal, Bowie had managed to get by. He was not the type to be a lawman. Everybody knew he had been awarded the job through pity. Even so, the pittance he received from the job did not supply his needs.

NOW saddled horses, buckboards and their teams stood in the yard. From one of the corrals came the restless stir and moan of cattle. In the kitchen the Hoskins children were doing the supper dishes. Through the front room windows Delaney saw some of the assembled pool men, the drone of their voices carrying outside.

As Delaney dismounted a small figure darted out of the shadows, sped toward him. When he drew near he slowed, and Delaney recognized Bowie's oldest youngster, a boy of twelve.

"Howdy, Tad," he said grinning. "Long time no see."

"Same to you, Tex. Only yuh shore might have come over sooner. Yuh used to come often when Starr was with us."

The youth's candid resentment stung Delaney. When he had left for war, Tad Hoskins had been only a small button. He had followed Delaney around, imitating his every gesture and fairly idolizing the ground he walked on. The kid had grown into a thin-faced gangling youngster with hungry eyes and an exaggerated pride that poverty sometimes nurtures. Now he was hurt, terribly hurt.

Delaney remembered seeing Tad at his father's funeral. And so engrossed with his own somber thoughts and grief had he been that he had overlooked the boy.

"I'm sorry, Tad," he said quietly. "But I've never forgotten yuh."

Tad brightened. "Yuh mean that, Tex?"

"Never meant anything more, Tad. If I've slighted yuh, pard, it's been because I've had so much on my mind. How about shakin' and startin' anew?"

"Shucks, pardner. It suits me."

Delaney grasped the boy's thin hand in a firm clasp. Tad grinned happily, then the troubled look flicked back into his eyes. In a breathless whisper he told of much of the trouble that Delaney already knew about.

"Plenty's goin' to pop, Tex. I see it comin', and so does Pop. Only he tries to quiet us kids. Whatever happens I want to side yuh, pard. I can shoot and ride anything with hair or feathers. Don't blame Sis for marryin' that skunk of a sojer. Keep yore eyes on that Lamont. He's the dark feller in the woodpile. He's in there now tellin' Pop and the others about comin' out of their tight by freightin' our cow-hides through to his taller factory in Rockport."

"Mebby Lamont's not so bad, Tad."

"Bad?" the kid scoffed fiercely. "Shucks, Tex! He's worse'n that! Don't fall for his hog-wash. I ain't blind, even if I am just a button. He's got plans for starvin' every honest cowman out of the valley and layin' claim to the land for hisself. Watch him, Tex. Watch him like yuh would a coiled rattler. Him and his fine talk. Huh! It smells like skunk juice to me."

"I'll keep my eyes peeled, Tad."

"And if yuh need me, whistle, pard. Jeb Wilkins was shot and killed from the brush last summer. Then yore Pa, he was killed. And not a trace of who done it! But you and me can get to the bottom of it with a little undercover work."

"We'll work together, Tad," Delaney said grimly. "Anything yuh hear or see that might give us a clue, let me know. *Adios* for now, pard, and keep a stiff upper lip!"

Delaney strode up on the gallery as the boy darted back toward the kitchen door. Bowie met Delaney, gripping his hand.

"Glad yuh seen fit to come, Tex," he murmured. "Guess yuh know all these men except Lamont. This is Pierre Lamont, owner of the Circle L."

CHAPTER VIII

A Bushwhacking

A HUSH dropped over the assemblage. Delaney met the friendly gazes of the Valley ranchers with a nod, then turned toward the man he had heard so much about.

Pierre Lamont stood at the head of the gathering, a big man with every mark of breeding and culture and leadership. Poise and supreme confidence showed in a startling contrast to the uncertainty, fear and bewilderment of the poverty-ridden, back-to-the-wall cowmen he faced.

Lamont was garbed in a fine black suit, highly polished hand-sewn booth and a white linen shirt with a string bow tie. He was in his middle forties. A black mustache topped his upper lip, and his long sideburns and dark hair were immaculately groomed. A caricature of a smile touched his lips. His dark eyes were appraising, shadowed with unreadable subterranean thoughts.

"How do you do, Delaney," he said ponderously.

There was none of the slight accent so often found in people of French descent. Delaney grasped the extended hand, a queer, tickling feeling racing up his spine. He didn't know why. And then, like a smashing blow, he thought of Jean, this man't daughter. And wondered if she'd ever told him—

"Howdy, Lamont," he said tightly.

Delaney turned, took one of the seats offered him. In the awkward silence, Bowie cleared his throat and said:

"Go on with yore plans, Lamont."

Pierre Lamont's smile dropped. He was all business.

"I've explained my plans, gentlemen. You can work out the details later with my foreman, Jacques Chaffee. Business calls me back to New Orleans."

"I thought—" Bowie began humbly.

Lamont stopped him with a wave of his hand.

"I'll give a brief resume so that Delaney can understand, Hoskins. The deal is simply this, Delaney: I know the financial tight you men are in. This is a reconstruction in Texas and times are bad. I don't want to see you men fail. In Rockport I have established the largest hide and tallow factory on the coast. I'm in a position to buy your hides and pay more than the market value."

Lamont's voice boomed with enthusiasm. He would pay a flat rate of ten dollars a hide upon delivery in Rockport. Hides were all that mattered these days, not beef. His Circle L men would help plan the details. He could make money by buying the hides at such a figure, and the Mustang Valley Pool men could recoup from their losses, hold their land.

"I know some of you men have resented me." He shrugged. "And to overcome that I want to prove that I'm a good neighbor. Delaney, I'm sorry to hear of the trouble you had with two of my men this afternoon. Those are the misunderstandings I want to clear up. I am told that your father was recently murdered, and that other ranchers in the past have suffered the same fate. We can expect such tragedies in this land until law and order come. Let's make the best of it and fight this thing through. Any questions, gentlemen?"

The pool men sat with sagging jaws, eyes darting from face to face.

"I reckon not, Lamont," Delaney said quietly.

"Then I'll be going, gentlemen."

Lamont nodded and smiled and shook hands with Bowie as he went out. He seemed to take all the air out of the room with him. Bowie leaned against the door, a faint ray of hope glimmering in his eyes. When they heard the rattle of Lamont's buckboard Mossy Cooper shook loose of the spell.

"What do yuh make of it—an' him—Tex?"

"On the face of it, it sounds good."

That started a muttering of talk. Heads wagged. They didn't know, didn't know. Pierre Lamont was a "furriner." He was too high and mighty for such folks as them.

Delaney snapped to his feet, eyes blazing.

"Cut out the babble, gents! We're gettin' no place. My mind's made up. I'm corralin' every hide Chili and I can lay a knife to, and haulin' them through to Rockport. We might as well face the facts. None of us have a spare dollar. We're broke, dead broke, and we're goin' to lose our ranches if we don't get some money in quick.

"Dad and you men fought like blazes for yore spreads. And they're worth fightin' for again. This drouth and smashed beef market won't last always. Let's sell enough hides to get us through this winter. Bowie, yore kids go hungry at times. Yuh're foolin' nobody. Newberry, yore wife and daughter are killin' theirselves with worry. And the same condition applies to you other men. Forget yore grudge against Lamont and yore ugly suspicions. The War's over! Let's load our wagons with hides and go to Rockport!"

DELANEY'S words were like a lash, whipping the men to their senses. New hope brightened their eyes, made their haggard faces work with excitement. And Delaney prayed fervently that he was doing right.

"By glory, Tex," Bowie said huskily, "yuh've made me see the light."

Lane Newberry nodded, as did the others. In Delaney they had found the fighting, gambling leader they needed.

Plans were quickly whipped into shape. This was November. By the first of December they could have their hides in shape, their wagons repaired and ready for the trip.

"It's our salvation, Tex!" Long John Pike exclaimed jubilantly. "Our salvation. Only one thing. Yuh're younger than the rest of us. Yuh know the trail and the dangers of raids. Will yuh go as wagon-boss?"

"If that's the way yuh want it," Delaney replied.

There was no doubt but that was the way they wanted it. No vote was necessary. Afire with new hope, they wrung Delaney's hand. Later they tramped out to their horses and buckboards, whooping with joy. Delaney hung behind until he and Bowie were alone. Some of the deep-seated worry and fear was back in the oldster's eyes.

"Been in to see Starr, Tex?" he asked softly.

"Saw her before comin' out here, Bowie."

"Meet Lew Strang?"

Delaney nodded grimly, saying nothing about his brief battle with the Army man. Bowie looked away, pawing one side of his seamy face.

"Tex, gosh knows I hope we're doin' right in trustin' Lamont. But I don't know. It's our only out, that's shore. Keep yore cards close to yore chest and watch them gunhawks of his. When yuh start through

with them hides of our'n, yuh'll have our lives in yore hands. If somethin' should happen we'll be forced to get out."

The wind and sleet had died by the time Delaney rode away from the Leaning H. The night had cleared. Stars glimmered from the heavens and a red moon soared over the hills, spotting the rangeland with weird etchings of ghostly light and black shadows. It was quiet and cold, but Delaney could gather no peace to still his inner turmoil. Somewhere beneath the quiet was a sinister hint of disaster that made his flesh crawl.

He rode slowly through the high black brush, brooding and watchful, living again all that happened tonight. Invariably his thoughts turned to Jean Lamont. She, who was so lovely and desirable, was promised in marriage to Jacques Chaffee! Chaffee—an uncouth, swaggering killer, twice her age! It seemed incredible!

Delaney could find no answer to it. It rankled him, but after all, he told himself, Jean's affairs were not his. He tried to shake her image, but she stayed with him like an unwelcome saddle-mate.

Still a mile from his ranch, Delaney crashed his horse through a dense thicket into a *sendero*—a clearing. A butcher bird fluttered from its roost in the brush. A stick cracked off to one side of the dim trail. Tides of warning flashed through Delaney. He whirled, right hand diving down to the holstered six-shooter at his hip as a crouched figure took shope in the gloom.

Too late Delaney's gun cleared leather. With the horror of that knowledge he threw himself from the saddle as the bushwhacker's gun roared. Searing, blinding pain suddenly filled him. Terrible shock jarred his brain and robbed him of strength. He felt himself falling, and then the black robes of unconsciousness engulfed him and he knew no more.

His body struck the frozen ground, rolled and lay still. His horse bolted away, smashing nosily through the brush. Off to one side the shadowy figure of the bushwhacker darted back to a pocket in the mesquite where his horse stood with trailing reins. Flinging astride, he rode away. Overhead the red moon soared on through the clouds and the wind whispered sibilantly through the brush, like a warning of more bloodshed to come. . . .

DELANEY revived into a world of agonizing pain and swirling nausea. For a full moment he lay still trying to collect his senses. It was like awakening from a nightmare.

Biting back a groan, he chanced another shot from the brush and struggled to a sitting position. Blood caked one entire side of his face. Gentle probing fingers told him that the bushwhacker's bullet had gashed his temple just below the hairline. The wound had clotted, staying the flow of blood.

He was stiff and sore and half-frozen. Ribbons of fire roared through his body as he dragged himself slowly to his feet. Dazedly he got his directions and began stumbling through the brush toward home. A hundred feet farther on he came upon his horse standing with snagged reins.

It took all of Delaney's reserve strength to pull himself into the saddle. He clung to the kak horn, head dropping on his chest as the animal picked its way. It seemed like hours before the Horseshoe ranch buildings loomed into view. A small light glowed at the front room windows.

Too weak and spent to do more, Delaney pulled up near the gallery and dropped weakly to the ground. As he stumbled toward the house the front door opened and Chili stood there, a six-shooter clutched in his hand. When Delaney reeled into the block of light the little Mexican screamed.

"Tex! I thought I heard a shots. *Valiente!*"

Chili helped him into the house, laid him down on a sofa in the front room. Cursing in Spanish, moaning, he hurried into the kitchen for warm water and clean cloth for a bandage. As he bathed and dressed the wound he kept mumbling to himself.

"Who deed eet, Tex?"

"I don't know," Delaney replied.

"Bushwhack?"

Delaney nodded. His eyes closed and he lay there like a dead man, breathing ever so slowly. Chili knelt beside him like a man praying, his soul-weary bloodshot eyes wide. All the fire was gone from him. He felt only hopelessness and fear.

"Tex," he whispered.

But there was no answer. Only the sputter of the lamp on the table and the low moan of the wind outside where the red moon shone down. The fear kept eating into Chili. Delaney had been shot, and without Tex Delaney the little Mexican was helpless. Delaney had planned his prison escape for him, told him exactly what to do.

Chili felt the clamminess in the palms of his brown-skinned hands. He clutched up his six-shooter and ran to the kitchen and outside. Bowie Hoskins would help, he knew. Out in the dark shed he rigged his horse, leaped into the saddle and spurred away. The sound of his horse's frantically galloping hoofs died.

In the front room of the house Delaney moaned. His eyes fluttered open and he stared at the ceiling. The sound of riders pulling up in the yard didn't register in his

consciousness at first. He felt the gust of fresh air as the door banged open and men tramped into the room. Then out of the haze came a raspy voice.

"There he is, men! Search him and handcuff him!"

Red rage shook Delaney as blue-coated troopers, pistols palmed, grabbed his wrists and legs.

"Hey, Captain," one of the soldiers growled, "the fellow's hurt. He's been shot!"

"Which makes our chore all the easier!" Captain Strang grated. "Handcuff him!"

Delaney saw Strang then over the shoulders of the soldiers. Pistol in hand, the Army man stood in the middle of the room. His two eyes were swollen and purple but he was grinning gloatingly. Rough hands jerked Delaney to his feet, held him, while others searched him and applied handcuffs. In helplessness, he stood white-faced and swaying, eyes feverish beneath the stained bandage about his forehead.

"What's yore game this time, Strang?" he managed.

"No game, Delaney," Strang smirked. "I'm placing you under arrest and turning you over to the Federal government for prosecution. Going to do anything about it?"

Hate, swift and terrible, raged through Delaney. He felt positive that he was face to face with the man who had killed his father.

"Yuh hold aces now, Strang," he said in a bitter whisper, "and yuh'd best hold tight. For if I live I'm goin' to kill yuh!"

Strang shouldered his way through the group of men. Face set with deadly intent, he grasped Delaney's manacled hands, then swung. Too weak and sick to dodge, Delaney went down like a poleaxed steer.

Sensing the fierce rebuke in his men, Strang whirled on them, snapped an order to fetch the body of the prisoner. He went outside, mounted his horse and waited until his men had thonged Delaney's limp body across the saddle of his horse. Then he gave orders to follow.

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CHAPTER IX

Mystery—And A Murder

CAPTAIN Strang led his troopers into Mosquero and to the Army Post on the outskirts of the town. They passed the sentry and halted before the log guardhouse. Delaney was carried inside, placed on a bunk. Without consulting Strang, one of the troopers hurried to officers' quarters for the company physician.

Strang returned to the center of town, left his horse in front of the Lone Star Restaurant and strode around to the rear. A lamp burned inside. Without knocking, he opened the door and stepped inside. Starr, sitting on the bed sewing, looked up, startled.

"Hello, my sweet and charming wife," Strang said mirthlessly. "Where's the gun you took off of me earlier tonight?"

"Underneath the pillow here, Lew," Starr said tonelessly. "And don't make use of it. I'd hate to kill you. But if you start something, I will."

"Bedtime, isn't it?"

"I'm the judge of that."

She knew by his eyes that something terrible had happened. Her heart pounded in her throat. She wanted to scream at the man taunting her, but no sound came.

"Delaney's in the brig, Starr," he said then. "I just took some men out and brought him in. He's going back to prison."

He watched the girl, watched her hands for fear she would make a grab for the pistol. His own hand dangled near the butt of his gun. When she made no move he backed out the door, closing it behind him. Outside he stood in the darkness for several seconds, waiting. When no stir came from Starr's quarters he hurried back to the street.

It was late, but light still shone at the window of Bottle Lawrence's saloon. He swaggered inside, glanced up and down the room and stepped up to the bar. Bottles Lawrence stopped counting the money in his cash drawed and scowled.

"What yuh have, Strang?" he grunted.

"Captain Strang to you, red-nose!" the Army man snarled.

Bottles set out the whisky and a glass. A mustanger and a sheep-herding Mexican stood farther down the bar near the hot pot-bellied stove. Otherwise the place was empty. They watched Strang down a quick

drink. His hands didn't shake so much after he'd had half a dozen.

"Tex Delaney," he said nastily, "is in the brig over at the Post."

"The devil!" Bottles said.

"I'm sendin' him back to prison."

"The devil!" repeated Bottles.

"That's where his kind belong—in prison!"

"The devil!"

Strang slapped his glass down on the bar top, breaking it. He leaped back, glowering, and fighting mad. His pistol was in his hand and he was a little tipsy.

"That's right!" he bawled savagely. "And if you say devil again I'll drill you!"

He stamped out and when the door slammed behind him Bottles bellowed, "Devil!" and ducked. . . .

Night shadows faded as a cold wintry dawn spread its mantle of light over the Brasada. Delaney opened his eyes to see the kindly Post physician bending over him. It took him a full minute to recall all that had happened.

"How do you feel, son?" the doctor asked gently.

"I'm all right."

The doctor smiled sadly. "Don't be harsh with me, Delaney. I know what you've been through. I'm going to do all I can for you, and I know your friends will do the same. Just remember this. All Army men are not like Captain Strang!"

"I know that, Doc."

"Rest all you can. You'll be all right."

The medico left. Delaney slept most of the day through. When he awoke a guard brought him hot broth, which he was able to eat. He felt better after that. The throbbing, searing pain in his head lessened. For hours he lay on his bunk, staring up at the barred window, barely conscious of the hum of activity of the Army camp.

Next day Bowie Hoskins was admitted in to see him by the guard. The old lawman was glum and depressed. He asked about all that had happened and Delaney told him of being buckwhacked, then of Strang and his men riding to the ranch.

"Chili come tearin' over to the house. Reckon it must have been near midnight. He said yuh had been shot and he was afraid yuh was dyin'. Me and Tad rode back with him. Yuh was gone by the time we got there. We seen something was wrong and hightailed into town. Bottles Lawrence was just closin' up for the night. He was madder'n a hornet when he told us what Strang had done."

AFTER that Bowie explained how the pool men were working to get ready for the drive to Rockport with their hides. But their hearts were not in their work now.

"Don't stop just because this has happened to me, Bowie!" Delaney rapped grimly. "Go ahead! It's yore only chance. Man, don't yuh realize it? Chili will take my hides, reppin' for me. Send some of the younger men to make the trip. Men who know how to use their guns. But go!"

Bowie said they would, but he was half-hearted about it. It was as if all his world of hopes and plans had crumbled beneath him. Without some sort of leadership, he and the other pool men were lost.

"Anything I can do for yuh, Tex?" he asked despondently.

"Nothin', Bowie."

The guard escorted him out. Later that day Chili and Tad Hoskins paid a call. Their report was much the same as Bowie's. And Delaney told them the same.

"It's up to you now, Chili. Gather every Hoss-shoe hide yuh can. Fix up the old wagon out in the shed and help get the pool men organized. You, Tad, help yore Pa all yuh can. He needs yuh now more than ever, pard."

"I will, Tex," the boy said, a choke in his voice. "But what about you?"

"I'll get along, Tad."

The boy's eyes blazed. "Cuss 'em, Tex, they can't do this to you! I'll—"

"Set tight, pard." Delaney smiled. "Set tight."

The next day a group of Valley men who had attended the meeting at Bowie's house visited Delaney in a body. The guard stood over them, permitting them only to come to the barred door of the cell. Ill at ease, they struggled vainly to hide the fury of their wrath. Regardless of the uniformed guard, old Mossy Cooper blurted:

"Say the word, Tex, and we'll organize every brush-popper in the Brasada. Feelin' is runnin' high, son. We'll take this cussed Post apart, log by log, and ride these bluecoats out of here on a rail!"

"And gain nothin', Mossy!" Delaney told him. "No, do as I say—go through with the drive to Rockport. I'll come out of this tight somehow!"

For two days after that he saw no one but the guards and the Post physician. With rest and excellent care his wound began healing, but his strength was slow in returning. Impotent hate smoldered in him like a fever. Anxiety and impatience were like a saddle-sore that wouldn't heal. Right now the valley men needed him more than ever, and he was helpless.

Delaney struggled to retain his balance when it seemed that he would go mad. Fiercely he probed every angle for means of escape, but there was none. In his talk with the Valley men he had felt the antagonism and distrust they felt for Pierre Lamont.

They feared the dangers of the trail. The threat of Juan Cortina raiding was constantly a source of torment.

Next day Strang paid his first call to the guard-house. His beady eyes glowed triumphantly as he peered into Delaney's cell.

"I've made arrangements for a military guard to take you to prison, Delaney," he boasted. "You'll leave tonight. It's the first of December, so you'll be back in prison in time to enjoy Christmas. It might also interest you to know that Starr has come to her senses at last. She's coming to the Post to live with me. What do you say to that, my Rebel friend?"

"I had my say the night yuh fetched me here, Strang," Delaney said softly. "I'll live to kill yuh, that's all. Kill yuh for murderin' my dad!"

Strang's eyes thinned. "You must be crazy, Delaney."

He turned and strode out, snapping an order to the guard who had overheard their talk.

That afternoon Bowie and Chili were admitted to see the prisoner. Dread and worry lay deep in the oldster's eyes. Chili was strangely uneasy. They, as the visitors before them, were searched for any hidden weapons before entering.

"The wagon train leaves tonight, Tex," Bowie said gloomily. "We're takin' yore advice, hopin' to gosh it's the right thing to do. Ten wagons is goin' through, includin' two of Lamont's, and one of yores. Chaffee has been attendin' our meetin's in Lamont's absence. Him and two of his tough hands is takin' command. And that's what worries me. I don't trust 'em. They're not our kind."

"Mebbe that's in our favor, Bowie," Delaney muttered.

BOWIE wagged his head, chewing his tobacco cud mournfully.

"It's the biggest gamble we ever took, Tex. There's a fortune in them hides. Us older men are stayin' behind, lettin' the young bucks stand the rigors. Chili is goin' representin' you. Long John Pike's two strappin' boys are goin', the Newberry boys and old man McPherson's younger brother, along with them two new ranchers in the valley. That'll make seven of our men and three of Lamont's men. One of our boys will do the cookin'."

Bowie revealed every detail of their plans. He kept wishing Delaney was going along. He and the other pool ranchers would feel safer if Tex were going. After Chili left, Bowie lagged behind.

"Yuh still think we can trust him, Tex?" he asked anxiously.

"Who?"

"Chili! He's actin' funny, Tex. Almighty funny! Mebbe he's all right, but that old man of his is still on the rampage. Juan Cortina still has the idea that us folks is squattin' on his land. I didn't tell yuh this before because Chili was here. But word drifted down the trail today that some ranchers east of us started through with some hides and was raided by Cortina. They was all killed and their hides stolen.

"That's what's worryin' me sick, son. More'n that, Chili disappeared for a couple of days. One of the boys cut his trail and reported that it led to Mexico. Puttin' two and two together we got every reason to believe that Chili visited his old man. There's trouble afoot, Tex. I feel it, but I'm tryin' to keep my chin up for the sake of the others. If them hides don't get through we're ruined."

He left shortly after that, saying he would return the next day. He didn't mention Starr, nor did Delaney ask the oldster about her. Bowie was bearing all the burden one man could manage.

Night fell thick and black. Snow began falling, hurtling through the darkness in great flakes that would soon drift. Delaney, pacing the floor of his cell, suddenly stopped, ice flowing along his nerves. A tiny stir outside his cell window stabbed into his senses. Behind the bars a shadow moved. There was a faint clicking sound of steel touching steel. Then the shadow was gone.

In one bound Delaney reached the window, his heart hammering wildly. A six-shooter lay there on the sill. Quickly he clutched it up, flipped back the cylinder to examine the loads. There were four bullets in it. It was the gun that Delaney had taken from Strang the night they met in Starr's room!

Delaney went hot and cold all over. If his guess was right Starr had sneaked up to his window just now and left the gun. He stepped to the cell door, bridling the frantic clamoring inside him.

"Guard," he called quietly.

From the front door came the clump of boot heels along the corridor. Out of the chill gloom appeared the uniformed soldier.

"What do you want, Delaney?" he rapped.

The six-shooter was suddenly in Delaney's white-knuckled fist. His eyes were glowing with deadly intent.

"Make a sound and I'll shoot, bluecoat!" he gritted. "I'm not foolin'! Unlock this door and be quick about it. This ain't yore fight, feller. It's between Strang and me. Now hurry!"

The soldier's eyes flew wide. He must have known he was as near death as he had ever been. A huge key ring jangled in his fumbling fingers. He inserted the proper key, threw back the bolt. The heavy door

gave to Delaney's shoulder. There was a dull thumping sound as the barrel of his gun slammed down on the soldier's head.

Delaney caught the man as he fell.

"Hate to do this, feller," he muttered. "But it's the only way."

Swiftly he carried the soldier inside the cell, stripped him of his great coat and service hat. Donning them himself, Delaney sped down the corridor to the front door. He opened it, eased cautiously outside, the cocked six-shooter gripped in his fist.

Through the hurtling white curtain of snow and darkness he glimpsed the dim figure of the sentry at the front gate. Across the parade grounds, yellow light glowed in the windows of the officers' quarters, mess hall and barracks.

With his thoughts in a seething turmoil, Delaney darted to the corner of the guardhouse. A pistol shot from the direction of the officers' quarters stopped him. In the darkness he flattened against the log wall as yells pierced the storm. Shadows churned and other men began yelling. The barracks doors burst open and troopers poured outside.

Then a yell, higher than the others, jarred into Delaney's whirling senses like dagger thrusts!

"Good God, men! Captain Strang's been murdered!"

CHAPTER X

Vengeance Trail

INSTANTLY Delaney saw his chance and took it, his brain afire with rioting emotions. With the confusion and turmoil of the aroused camp throbbing in his ears, he whirled around the corner of the guardhouse, heading for the brush. The sentry at the front gate dropped flat on the ground, breath bated.

Other soldiers were charging across the dark parade grounds. The sentry spun to meet them. And in that moment Delaney made his bid, leaping to his feet and racing toward the fringe of high black brush. An excited, muffled challenge pierced the uproar behind him. A rifle boomed and questing lead whined close as Delaney won free.

Through the mesquite and blinding snowfall he ran on, the cocked pistol gripped in his fist. Back of him the muted growl of the Army camp ebbed and flowed. He stayed in the brush, avoiding the wagon road, until the buildings of town loomed up in the night before him.

At the rear of Bottle Lawrence's saloon he paused to fill his bursting lungs. He knew his escape had already been discovered. Somebody had killed Captain Strang and, either purposely or coincidentally, it had been timed just right with Delaney's escape.

Names of those who might have killed Strang flashed through his brain—Starr, Bowie, Chili; several of the pool ranchers who hated the Army man. But unless the real murderer was found, Delaney knew that *he* would be blamed for it!

Running on through a narrow lane between two of the buildings, Delaney reached the street front. Saddled horses stood at the hitch-pole in front of the saloon. He made for one of the animals in long strides, clutched up the reins and hit leather as the horse bolted.

The saloon door opened behind him. A man, limned there against the light inside, yelled. Then soldiers suddenly appeared along the plank walks, spreading the alarm, their strident bawls carrying through the storm-filled night.

"Delaney escaped and killed Cap Strang!"

Delaney left the town behind, his mind groping for the right answer. Futile resentment gripped him, for in escaping he had actually plunged himself deeper into the mire. A killer's bullet had cheated him of choking the truth from Strang, had robbed him of fulfilling his vengeance vow. Everywhere he went now the law would hound him, demanding its penalty.

Disconsolately he turned toward Bowie's ranch, riding hell-for-leather. A half mile from the oldster's spread he spied the vague outline of a rider on the trail ahead of him. Delaney spurred faster, overtaking the rider. Suspicions roweled him when the man suddenly wheeled, a six-shooter flashing into his hand.

"Bowie!" Delaney yelled into the storm.

The old lawman's gun lowered as Delaney curbed close by. Amazement jarred him.

"By the leapin' flames of perdition, Tex!" he shouted. "I thought—"

"Where *you* been, Bowie?" Delaney clipped.

"Town."

"What doin'?"

"Tarnation, Tex! Let me pop a few questions! The wagon-train pulled out an hour ago. I rode with them a ways, then angled back to town to lock up my office. Just left a few minutes ago, headin' for home. Then up you faunch, scarin' the wits out of me. Quick, how'd yuh get loose?"

Hurriedly Delaney told him everything. Bowie's jaw sagged, a low moan of despair escaping him. And instantly Delaney knew

the oldster had had no hand in the events tonight.

"Who could have done it, Tex?"

"We can only guess, Bowie."

"Starr—" Fear was in the oldster's eyes. "Mebbe" Delaney snapped. "Mebbe not, Bowie. Heavens knows she had reason enough to want to shoot him, from all I've seen and heard. Set tight, keep yore mouth shut and look out for her if things get hot. I'm headin' for Juan Cortina's settlement."

"Tex! Yuh're not able!"

"Able be blowed, Bowie. I'm goin' to do everything possible to see that the wagons get through safely. By goin' to Cortina's I can find out if he's actually raidin' the trail. Chili was with the wagons, was he?"

"I think so."

"Then do as I say, Bowie. And good luck!"

He waited to hear no more protests from the oldster. He wheeled and spurred off across the valley, veering far around town and heading on to the south. Tired, cold and depressed, he reached the broad, sluggish river shortly before dawn. Crossing into Old Mexico, he made dry camp in a *mogote* of *huajilla* as the new day broke.

FOR a while he rested, giving his horse a breather and a chance to forage off of the tufts of mesquite grass jutting through the snow. The storm continued, blanketing the ground and surrounding hills in white. There from his cover of brush, he saw a small group of heavily armed soldiers ride up to the Texas side of the river and stop. They talked a while and turned back.

Remounting, Delaney followed the angling river. Hunger gnawed at his being. The icy wind whipped through the blue Army coat he was wearing, chilling him to the bone. He was still weak from the ordeal he had been through. But from the deep inner wells of his rawhide toughness he drew the strength to go on.

That afternoon he shot a wild turkey, and in a tangled thicket he roasted it over a small fire, eating his fill. Then under snow-filled leaden afternoon skies, he forged on. Farther down the river, opposite the Texas trail to Rockport, was the small Mexican settlement where Juan Cortina had taken refuge.

All Delaney knew of the place was what he had heard from Chili, and from hearsay. Since the unfortunate Mier Expedition into Mexico, few Texans had dared the threat of this wild land. Mexico, in the throes of revolution, was rampant with lawlessness and internal disorder. Mexicans, once powerful owners of vast cattle herds and *haciendas*, had sought refuge south of the Rio after the fall of the Alamo.

Juan Cortina had been one of these Mexicans. Fierce in his hates and violent in his loves, Cortina had fled to Mexico, cursing the gringo robbers. But Chili, heedless of his father's scorn, had returned to Texas. In this settlement, gossip had it, Juan Cortina had organized his *mozos* and *paisanos*, embittering them against the gringos, giving vent to his spleen in raiding.

Here, according to Chili, Juan Cortina's beautiful Irish wife had died, torn between the love of her fiery Spanish husband and her love for Texas. And here in this squalid settlement, Juan Cortina had continued to live alone, dreaming and hating, wanted by the Texas law and an outcast of his own country because of political ambitions.

It was generally known as *Rancho Diablo*. Ranch of the Devil.

That night Delaney made camp in another thicket, warming himself by a small fire. At dawn he was up, riding on, denying himself the rest that his body needed. Toward noon he came within gunshot of a small Mexican village, circled it and went on.

By evening the snow had stopped falling, but the arctic wind kept blowing. As shadows gloomed the river country Delaney spotted *Rancho Diablo* in a small basin below him. The place tallied exactly with the description Chili had given him. Built of unplastered 'dobe, a high wall enclosed a scatteration of low-roofed buildings and huts. A small mission stood in the middle, its cross rising above the other buildings.

Boldly, Delaney dipped his horse down the hill and rode closer. Wood smoke, the smell of frijoles and garlic, filtered through the thin wintry air. As he approached the open gate a mongrel ran out and snapped at the horse's heels. Black-shawled, whang-leather-skinned women came to the candle-lighted 'dobe windows to peer out into the gathering gloom.

Keen to his danger, Delaney drew up at the doorway of the mission as a black-robed *padre* walked outside. The *padre* stared in unmasked wonder. That reminded Delaney that he was wearing the hated blue coat and hat of the American *soldados*.

"I am hunting," he said in Spanish, "Senor Juan Cortina. Can you help me, Father?"

The holy man shook his head. "You come too late, soldier of Texas."

"Why?"

"The Senor Cortina was captured by the Federation six months ago and taken to Mexico City to answer a charge of political treason. There he lies in prison."

"You speak the truth, Father?"

"*Padres*, my son, do not lie."

Delaney felt the blood come to his face. "I did not mean it that way."

The holy man nodded understandingly. "You come alone?"

"Alone.

"Your mission I know not, my son. Nor are your worldly affairs mine. But if you wish to leave here, and live, you had best come with me."

TIDES of warning whipped through Delaney. He whirled in the saddle, his blood cold. Tension gripped the small settlement. At the gate behind him leaned a man, eyes glowering in the gloom, gripping a rifle that was half hidden by his serape. As if by magic other men appeared in the darkened doorways, watching. The hate that Cortina had instilled in them was deep.

The *padre* was waiting. Every nerve taut, Delaney said:

"Thank you, Father."

The holy man showed Delaney to some stables in the rear of the mission. After the horse was cared for they entered the church by a rear door. Back here the *padre* maintained his living quarters, eating and sleeping, drinking his red wine and giving his blessings to the children who sought his companionship during the day. In his eyes was the love and glory and tragedy of Old Mexico.

While the tapers burned the *padre* set out warm food and wine. Delaney ate heartily, thankful for this haven and rest. But he knew no peace of mind. A hundred questions plagued him, stirring him with unrest.

"Yes, my son, the Senor Cortina has been in prison in Mexico these past six months," the *padre* repeated.

And Delaney knew he was hearing the truth. Any raids made on the Texas trail since then had been done by someone other than Juan Cortina!

Puzzled by his fruitless quest, Delaney lay awake on his pallet for hours that night. He heard the fat *padre* quietly leave his room and depart by the rear door of the mission. Later he heard the holy man return, and he wondered. At dawn he woke to find the *padre* bending over him.

"It is best that you leave early, my son," he intoned. "The feeling of my people runs high against all Texans."

Delaney understood and again expressed his thanks. The *padre* had prepared him a sack of food to take with him. He followed Delaney out to the shed while he rigged and mounted. In the dreary gray light he led the way to the open gate, his fat arm lifted in hail and farewell.

"Adois, my son. *Vaya con Dios."* . .

"Con Dios," Delaney replied gratefully.

He headed straight for the river, realizing that the *padre* had saved his life. His mind was made up. If his guess was right the

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wagon caravan from Mustang Valley should be about opposite him on the Texas trail. If luck rode with him he might join the wagon train and see it safely to Rockport. There the young pool men could dispose of their hides and return to the valley with the money.

Delaney felt the full weight of his responsibility for the safety of the wagons. By the force of his iron will Bowie and the other discouraged pool men had listened to him. For himself he felt little hope of salvation. Branded the murderer of an Army captain, the word would spread. The law, such as it was, would hound him relentlessly. The peace and security he had once hoped for was gone. And hope of unmasking the murderer of his father was like a canker sore that would never heal.

CHAPTER XI

Suspicion's Prey

NEVER once did Delaney abate his vigilance as he rode on northward through the unsettled, brush-filled country. At the river he barely paused. That afternoon it began raining, melting the light skift of snow. The downpour continued, turning the grassy low spots into pools, flooding the gullies.

Soaked to the hide, sick of body and soul, Delaney stopped at dark, building a small fire to dry tinder beneath a shelving rock. He ate sparingly of the food the padre had given him, then slept. It was still raining when he woke at dawn and went on. At mid-morning he came abruptly out of the brush upon the trail that led to the coast.

Fresh hoof prints, the deep prints of wagon wheels in the mud told of the wagon-train's recent passing. He spurred his horse in hot pursuit. For an hour or more he kept the pace. Then, where the trail dipped down a long straight slope, he spotted the long line of loaded wagons, lurching and trundling through the muck behind the straining teams.

A man was riding guard behind the rear wagon, slicker-clad and armed with a rifle. He heard Delaney's approach and turned. In the blinding downpour he recognized Delaney and his croaking cry of joy broke through the storm.

"Tex! *Por Dios,* my prayers ees come true thees time!"

The gun-guard was Chili Cortina.

Delaney had little chance to say anything to Chili. The wagons were circling for a brief noonday halt. Teamsters piled down from their loads, striding forward. John Pike's two husky sons, Tom and Clay, greeted Delaney with obvious lack of warmth. They were nervous, ill at ease. It was the same with Newberry's tall, freckle-faced youngster. And the chill of their reception was like a slap in the face.

"Howdy, Tex," each one of them muttered morosely.

Then Jacques Chaffee was swaggering forward, guns bulging beneath his wet slicker, his boots caked with sticky mud. Black beard partly hid the half-healed scars that he had received in his fight with Delaney. His nose, still swollen and discolored, had set crookedly, giving his face a distorted appearance. His colorless eyes were as cold as those of a week-old dead man.

"Joinin' us, Delaney?" he rapped queerly. "Or goin' on before the law nabs yuh?"

"I'm stayin' with the wagons to Rockport, Chaffee," Delaney said coolly.

"Then?"

Delaney shrugged, stung by his reception. Deep and abiding rage stormed through him, but outwardly he was never calmer. The pool boys stood in silence, watching, awed by the deadly hate and tension. Nearer the wagons stood Chino, his scarred face expressionless, but his eyes missing nothing. With him was another Circle-L gunman.

"Word come up the trail that yuh'd killed Captain Strang and got away," Chaffee said tonelessly. "I'm roddin' this outfit and don't aim to have no trouble, Delaney. So far as I'm concerning yuh can go with us to Rockport. But when we reach there I want no part of yuh. They's a law, yuh know, agin harborin' criminals."

Chaffee turned on his heel, strode away. And only with effort did Delaney bridle his feelings. Under the impact of the Valley boys' stares, he turned to the wagon that carried his load of hides. The other men turned to their duties. A roaring fire was built in the inner circle. Unloading chuck from the rear wagon, one of the pool youths began cooking a meal.

Delaney went grimly about his chore of inspecting his team and wagon, watching his chance to be alone with Chili. The Mexican had done a good job of baling the hides. They were stacked high on the flat-bed wagon, held in place with ropes, and covered with a huge tarp.

When the grub call came, Delaney and Chili got their tin plates and cups and joined the other men. Chaffee and his two gunhands stayed to themselves, their furtive eyes missing nothing. Delaney's acquaintance with the Valley boys was slight. They were just kids when he went to war.

Patently they had found Chaffee a hard boss, profane and tough. But unaccountably the Circle L man had won their confidence. Maybe it was fear of him. Whatever it was, Delaney knew Chaffee had cunningly, subtly turned them against him. The grueling work and the constant threat of death had rubbed their nerves raw. They knew horses and cows. They were courageous, clean-cut lads who had jumped at the chance to come, expecting it to be a lark—and had found it more than they bargained for.

THEY wolfed their food in silence for the most part, gulping black coffee from tin cups and exchanging birdlike glances. Fear and weariness showed in their eyes. Their big hats were soaked and shapeless, their boots heavy with mud. Each of them packed six-shooters beneath their slickers, but not a one of them could hit a bucket at forty paces. Impulsive kids, they were, easily swayed and frightened by the burden of their responsibility.

Delaney saw his chance and said to young Clay Pike:

"What's in yore craw against me, feller?"

The youth scowled darkly. "Nothin'."

"Spill it!"

Clay Pike tossed his empty tin plate into the water bucket and spun, eyes blazing.

"Cuss it, Delaney, yuh ask us what's eatin' us after what we been through for four days and night? Mud and rain and snow! Boggin' wagons, and Chaffee tellin' us to hurry! Then you foggin' in here with the law on yore tail for killin' a man. What did yuh want us to do—kiss yuh? A man can only stand so much. And personal, I've had a bellyful. If it wasn't for the folks I'd turn back now."

"Steady, Clay," Delaney said softly.

"Steady, huh?" the boy raged. "Don't talk to me like I was a yearlin'. I'll fight anything with hair or claws, but this waitin', waitin', waitin' is drivin' us loco! This mornin' we passed what was left of two wagons after Juan Cortina struck. They was in ashes, the hosses dead and what was left of two men when the wolves got through."

The boy spun to face Chili before Delaney could stop him.

"Yuh might as well know how us boys feel about you, Chili. We shore ain't tickled because yuh're along. Mebbe yuh ain't bad, but yore old man is a back-stabbin' Mexican. He killed them two men along the trail, robbed 'em of their cowhides, packed 'em on his own hosses and got away."

The other Valley boys stood glowering, in complete accord with Pike's furious outburst. Chili's swart face was a battle-ground of mixed emotions.

"Get a grip on yoreself, Clay!" Delaney rapped. "I've seen bigger men than you crack on the trail before, but don't let it get yuh! I don't know who made that raid on the two dead men yuh saw this mornin'. But I *do* know it wasn't Juan Cortina!"

"An' how," a smirking voice behind him said, "do you know that, jailbird?"

Delaney whirled. Chaffee, his slicker pulled back and both thumbs hooked in his sagging gun-belts, faced him. Spotted strategically off to one side stood Chino, beady eyes glowing with killers' lust. Near the wagons hovered the other Circle L gunman.

Gun-trap! Delaney saw it and his blood went cold. From the Valley boys he could expect no help. But outwardly he was as cold as ice.

"The reason I know, Chaffee," he said, "is because I just came from Juan Cortina's *rancho*. Cortina has been in prison in Mexico City for the past six months."

"Hogwash, Delaney!" the wagon-boss grated. "That's soup to me and mighty thin! If it's a snake's game you and the Mexican are playin' with his old man's raiders it'd better be good. We're keepin' our eyes on yuh from here out. Make one crooked move and we'll shoot the both of yuh! Remember that, boys. Now back to yore wagons."

Delaney struggled for control as the sullen Valley boys tramped through the rain to their wagons. Later when he turned and strode toward his own team, Chili trailed after him like a man dazed by the sudden turn of affairs.

"Tie our hosses to the rear of the wagon, Chili," Delaney said huskily. "I'll tool the team. Ride with me. There's plenty of things I want to talk over with yuh."

Chaffee and Chino, riding at the head of the wagons, shouted back orders for the caravan to roll. Atop the load, with Chili at his side, Delaney started his team. The wagon groaned into motion, the high wheels creaking and grinding through the deep gumbo mud.

Chili sat fingering an old rifle. He kept staring dejectedly ahead through the downpour.

"Now what weel we do, Tex?" he finally said.

"That's what I'm tryin' to figger out, Chili. Chaffee is cleverer than I gave him credit for bein'. He's playin' a game that I can't quite *sabe*."

"Yuh said my father was een preeson. Ees that true?"

"That's gospel, Chili."

DELANEY told the little Mexican all that had happened since his escape from the guard-house. Of his visit to *Rancho Diablo* and his talk with the *padre*.

"In my own mind that clears yore father of much of the deviltry that's been laid at his

feet, Chili. But provin' to the world that he's innocent of these crimes is somethin' else."

Chili was silent for a long time. "Now what do yuh aim to do, *compadre?*"

Delaney's beard-stubbled face was bitter. "I don't know. If I can live long enough to help put the Valley pool men in the clear I reckon my chore will be done. By the way, Chili, I heard yuh hightailed it into Mexico for a couple of days before the wagons left. Why did yuh do it?"

Chili looked at Delaney quickly. "Who told yuh?"

"Bowie Hoskins."

Chili nodded in admission. "I deed, Tex. I sneaks across the Line."

"To see yore father?"

"No. Remember me wan time talkeeng of Maria Gomez? She weeth thee beeg eyes and the so red leeps. I founda her still livin' weeth her father on thee leetle *rancho* across the Rio from Mosquero. Some day we have the hopes of bein' marry. But I tell her thats can wait."

Delaney faintly remembered the senorita who had promised her love to Chili. She and her aged father had come to Mosquero the night before Chili and Delaney left for war.

After that both men were silent, prey to the same evil foreboding. When the wagon behind them sank to the hubs and stuck, they were first to lend help. In the mud and bitter cold they pushed and toiled. Chaffee rode back, cursing and fuming at the delay.

"Hurry up there, yuh greenhorns!" he bawled. "Shove the wagon free, then keep an eye peeled for them bogs after this. At this rate we won't hit Rockport till next summer!"

"Cut her to the right, Newberry," Delaney told the frightened, bewildered youth.

The boy glared down from the load, eyes hot with rebellion. "Don't tell me what to do, Delaney! Yuh're not the boss around here!"

Delaney's temper slopped over. "Mebbe not," he fired back. "But for yore dad's sake I want to see yuh get through safe and hide-whole."

The Newberry boy bit his lips, warned by what he saw in Delaney's eyes. Grumbling, cursing, he set about the task as Delaney advised, and came out of the mire. But that night at supper the undercurrent of friction that Chaffee had built up in these boys for Delaney showed strongly. They avoided him and Chili, eating alone, muttering boorishly among themselves.

Toward these boys Delaney felt only sympathy. Nothing he could do or say would change things. With devilish cunning Chaffee had played upon their overwrought nerves and fears, knowing they were just gullible boys. Now, fired with suspicion and unrest, they were liable to do anything rash.

Soaked and miserably cold, Delaney turned to his wagon when the cheerless meal was done. Chili handed him a spare blanket and crawled beneath the load with him. The little Mexican unstrapped the holstered gun and cartridge belt he had been wearing beneath his slicker.

"Take thees, Tex. I gots thee rifle. That seex-gun yuh have only has a few loads. Thees way yuh have planty."

Delaney accepted the old .44 six-shooter, strapped it about his waist. He laid aside the Army Colt that had been slipped into his prison window. Then he rolled up in the blanket. So intent was he with his morbid thoughts he didn't see or hear Chili crawl out from beneath the wagon and disappear.

CHAPTER XII

Guns of Treachery

EXCEPT for the whining wind and pelting downpour the camp grew quiet. The sizzling drops beat down upon the camp-fire, dulling its red glow. Chaffee, making it a point to avoid Delaney's wagon, made the rounds of the camp, appointing various men to stand guard. Chino and the two new Valley ranchers stalked out into the surrounding brush to take the first shift.

Delaney closed his eyes, aching in every muscle. Some time later he sat up with a start, every nerve on edge. Turning, he saw Chili's empty blanket. Then voices, muffled and eerie, filtered through the rainy darkness from one of the wagons ahead.

Near Delaney's wagon a stick snapped. A crouched shadow moved. Gun in hand, Delaney flattened, tense, eyes on the blurry shape that kept creeping closer. Chili's warning whisper suddenly leaped out of the gloom at him. Then the Mexican was at his side, his dark face wet with rain and working with excitement.

"Tex, come queeck! Chaffee ees sendin' two of thee boys back to thee Valley. Eet looks bad. Bad. Come weeth me."

He led the way, squirming along on the muddy ground with all the stealth and quiet of an Indian. Along the line of wagons both men eased nearer the sound of the low voices. The camp-fire had died to a smoldering bed of ashes, shedding a weird glow over the inner circle.

In the darkness Chili stopped, waited until

Delaney dragged up alongside of him. Beneath the wagon nearest them the dim shapes of several huddled figures were discernible. Chaffee's raspy whisper suddenly came clear.

"Delaney and that Mexican are up to no good. We might as well face the facts. Both of 'em have got prison records. And the law's hot on Delaney for killin' the Army Captain. Chino told me a while ago he heard 'em plottin'. My guess is they plan to hold us up and take every hide. Mebbe old Cortina is in on the deal. I don't know."

"Gosh, Chaffee," the McPherson youth croaked. "Delaney shorely ain't that bad. He shorely—"

"Don't be blind, Mac! It's all of us agin them two, but if Cortina is backin' 'em the odds is in their favor. We're goin' to need help and need it bad. You, Clay, you and yore brother are sneakin' out of here tonight. Kill yore hosses gettin' back to the Valley. Tell Hoskins an' the others we need help. Tell 'em we're afraid Delaney and the Mexican are plottin' again us to steal our loads. There's a small fortune in them hides. And yore folks will be ruined if we don't get through."

Chaffee's voice waned. A raging, fierce urge to call to Chaffee, give him a chance to defend himself, then down him with lead filled Delaney. But in doing so he knew that the Valley boys, already terrified, would side Chaffee. Some of them would die and no kind of explanations could clear Delaney's name.

So, signaling to Chili, Delaney squirmed back to his own wagon. In a low whisper, hoarse with passion, he said:

"They're believin' Chaffee, Chili—swallerin' his bait, hook, line and sinker. Nothin' we can do will stop 'em. They're scared silly. If we call for a show-down they'll have us bested. When Clay and Tom sneak out of camp, you trail them. Down the back-trail a piece, catch up with them and try to beat some sense into their heads. If they're still bent on returnin' with Chaffee's cock and bull story of our treachery, go with them!"

"But you, Tex?"

"I'm stickin' with the wagons Chili—no matter what. These hides have got to get through! I'll take care of myself. . . . There goes the two boys towards the hosses. Get goin', Chili. And good luck, *compadre!*"

Chili's protests were never uttered. Like a shadow he darted away, vanishing into the black mantle of night. Delaney flattened on his blanket, six-shooter in his fist, pulse hammering at his temples. Again he struggled with the terrible urge to face Chaffee and his two gunmen and demand a show-down. It was bound to come sooner or later. But again better judgment held him.

Out of the night came the furtive whisper of hoof-beats. Then the faint sound of men turning in for the night. After that there was silence except for the moan of the wind and the steady rainfall.

Delaney knew that sleep was out of the question. His mind galloped with a hundred maddening thoughts and plans. Chaffee, his two gunmen, young Newberry and McPherson, and the two new Valley ranchers were all now. At best it would make them terrible short-handed when they went on in the morning. One of the wagon teams would have to be hitched behind the wagon in front.

AN HOUR dragged past. Delaney rolled and tossed, his mind still churning. Then, quite suddenly, two quick gunshots from the outer fringe of brush stabbed his nerves. On the heels of it came the blare of a gun from one of the wagons ahead. One of the Valley boys screamed in mortal terror. A man cursed. Then the boy was out from beneath his wagon, sprinting across the inner circle toward Delaney, shrieking at the top of his lungs.

"Delaney! Delaney! Help! Good gosh, Chino turned his gun on McPherson—killed him!"

It was the Newberry boy, unarmed and running. In mid-stride his body jarred as lead smashed into him from the flaming gun at his back. He sprawled a lifeless heap as Delaney came out of his blanket. Trouble had reared its ugly head. Death was the answer.

A gun barrel jabbed into Delaney's back. He spun, stricken by the knowledge that he was too late. Chaffee stepped back, facing him, his colorless eyes bright with deadly intent. Then Chino, his scarred and ugly face twitching, stalked up with the other gunman.

"This is as far as yuh go up the trail, Delaney!" Chaffee was snarling. "Us three are takin' the hides on through—with mebbe a little help. The Valley boys are dead. I was savin' you for myself. When them Pike boys and the Valley men return they'll find only ashes and bodies. It's like Lamont ordered, *sabe?* You'll be the one that done it, with Cortina!"

Delaney's voice was a throaty whisper. "Yuh doublecrossin' snakes!"

Chaffee's six-shooter roared and Delaney flung himself to one side, his own gun flaming as he dived toward the ground. In that split second everything came clear, and he cursed the men whose vicious treachery had ruined a rangeland and the name of Delaney.

Lead tore into Delaney's chest as he rolled, fighting desperately to regain his feet. But he cursed and killed. Grimly he strove to

down Chaffee, but the wagon-boss leaped back to cover, evading him. Through the swirling smoke and darkness Delaney saw Chino's tall body stiffen, spin and fall as lead smashed into his face. The killer named "Silver" was on his knees, one arm limp where another of Delaney's bullets had found a mark. Then the strength poured from Delaney and he fell as oblivion claimed him. . .

Chaffee, smoking pistol clenched in his fist, remained in a huddle near one of the wagons as the surrounding hills tossed back the echoes. His thick lips pulled back over his teeth in what he meant for a grin, but the cringing fear of a coward was in his eyes. He kept staring at the bodies. Chino was dead. He hadn't meant for Chino to die. Silver, tall and thin, was rising to his feet, clutching a bloody arm.

"We done her, Silver," Chaffee said shakily.

"Shure, but Chino's dead," Silver grumbled.

Chaffee drew himself erect. He looked a little sick and his swagger was gone, but he didn't want Silver to know he was afraid.

"Don't like this kind of business, Chaffee," Silver was saying. "Afeerd we'll never get away with it. Yuh should have just up and shot Delaney like we did them other fellers without all that talk. Chino wouldn't have been killed if yuh'd done that."

"Shut up, Silver," Chaffee rasped. "Yuh're gettin' good pay for this, and to keep yore mouth shut. Make shore Delaney's dead. Then tote his body back in the hills somewheres and bury it beneath a cut-bank. We'll fix them other bodies so's it'll look like they died fightin'. I'm ridin' on up the line to meet the other hands. Lamont and them was 'sposed to be camped near Knob Hill. That's where they was 'sposed to raid us. But I figgered my way would be quicker and easier. We're goin' to hurry to get the job done."

Chaffee saddled his horse and left, relieved to get away. Silver had no stomach for his chore. He didn't like to be around dead men. Like all gunmen he was superstitious. Grumbling, he bandaged his wounded arm with his bandana, loaded Delaney's limp body over the back of Chino's horse. Then, leading the animal, he walked through a gully in the hills to the southward.

He went a mile or so, through the brush and drizzling rain. Once he stopped, gun in hand, bent and listening as something moved in the mesquite near him. Into his slow-working mind came terror. He wasn't afraid of facing men with guns. It was the darkness and the hurt of his wound that got him now.

"I ain't afeerd," he said. "Ain't afeerd."

But he was. It was an unholy fear that shook him to the depths of his cowardly soul. In a tangled thicket he stopped again. He heard something and turned in time to see Delaney's limp body slide to the ground from the slippery horse's back.

Silver waited to see no more. He started back toward the trail, running part of the way. No one would ever find Delaney's body or the horse back there in the thicket. When Chaffee asked Silver about the job, Silver would lie. Sure, he'd tell Chaffee he buried the body. And nobody would ever know. Not even if the bones were found years hence. . . .

DELANEY awoke with the wintry sun in his eyes, chill, stiff, and with his feverish body filled with one vast hurt. Insects hummed and buzzed around him in the brush. Dazedly he stared down at the blood on his shirt front. His tongue was swollen. Thirst was like a fiend, pricking his throat with tiny spears.

With a lot of effort he sat up, staring dazedly out of pain-shot eyes at the unsaddled horse with the trailing reins. The animal was only a few feet away, but it took the last iota of Delaney's strength to reach him. Twice he fell trying to climb astride before he finally succeeded. Then he got the horse in motion.

He had no idea where the horse was taking him. His head slumped down on his chest. Sometime later he became conscious of someone jabbering in Spanish, lifting him down to the ground and dragging him inside a tiny mud hut. The Mexican stretched him out on a blanket and began examining the bullet-hole through his shoulder.

"You are a man of iron, senor," he whispered in Spanish. "Else you would have died before now. But I fear you are done."

"I can't die," Delaney said weakly.

"That is up to the gods."

"Then I'll live. I've got to live to kill a man."

Gato Gutierrez, who herded goats along the river, shook his head wearily. To him gringos would forever remain a mystery. . . .

* * *

Christmas came and passed. The furious winter storms of the Brasada became fewer and fewer. Two months had gone by since the fateful night of Captain Strang's murder. Tragedy and ruin had struck in Mustang Valley, but there would be more bloodshed before it was over. That was the word that passed from lip to lip.

Wild cattle that had escaped capture were in the hills for anyone to brand. But still no trail-herds were made up for shipping. Cattle were worth just what their hides brought on the market at the hide and tal-

low factories along the Gulf Coast. Freighting them there safely was the problem.

Jacques Chaffee, working under Pierre Lamont's orders, hired more men. Twice, under heavy guard, he and his men braved the hazardous trail to Rockport with Circle L hides, sold them and returned safely. But the small pool ranchers, broke, discouraged and bitter, never made the gamble again.

"Old Cortina is afeerd to attack me now," Chaffee boasted in Bottles Lawrence's saloon one night. "See, I learned my lesson. Cuss him, let him strike, and my men will cut him down and sell *his* hide in Rockport. Too bad the other fellers ain't got money like Lamont to fight the thing through."

Two weeks before, a small rancher at the head of Bravo Creek in the valley, had been raided. The raiders had come smashing out of the night from the south, yelling and shooting. The rancher, a man by the name of Meade, had not stood a chance. He, his wife and small son had been murdered. Their few head of stock had been killed, their cabin and outbuildings burned.

Bowie Hoskins, Chaffee and several of the other ranchers had reached the scene too late to give help. The raiders were gone, leaving death and destruction behind. The ranchers trailed the raiders to the river and saw where they had crossed into Mexico.

They knew it was Cortina's band. They knew that eventually the same horrible fate awaited them in this God-forsaken land.

"I'm through now, boys," Sandy McPherson said, his gaunt face working. "I ain't thinkin' of myself. It's Ma and my daughter Sarah. There's just the three of us left now and I can't see them die. We're leavin' for some place where we can find peace and security."

He was the first to speak what was in the minds of them all.

CHAPTER XIII

A Wedding

FALSE-FRONTED buildings in Mosquero seemed to sag all the more, as if succumbing to the mystery and evil and rottenness of their surroundings. There was a tenseness in the air that once had been clean. People looked out of the half-open doors before they went into the street. Women no longer ventured down to the general store to do their shopping.

It was the waiting that brought the hysteria. That endless waiting for the end to come. When Chaffee and his gun-hung Circle L hands roared into town the place was theirs. In their profane belligerence they defied the hand of the law.

On two occasions Pierre Lamont had ridden into town with his men. The last time he did a little drinking in Bottles' saloon. When he talked other men fell silent.

"Give these men what they want, Bottles," he said, in his booming way, "and charge it to me. Since the Army has pulled out my word will be the law around here now. You understand that?"

He wasn't like the suave Frenchman he had been when the Valley folks first had known him. Reveling in his own power, he liked to make men cringe under his cold stare. He had a way of smiling when there was no smile on his lips at all.

"Shore, I understand, Mr. Lamont," Bottles said meekly.

"I'm glad, Bottles," Lamont said, smiling. "I don't want any more trouble in this valley. Delaney doing us the way he did and Cortina raiding us is enough."

"Seems that way."

"Things will be different one of these days."

"Guess so, Mr. Lamont."

"I plan to make one big ranch out of the Valley now."

"The devil!"

"Too bad about the other ranchers."

"I'll say so."

When Lamont, Chaffee and the other men tramped outside to their horses and rode out of town, Bottles was left alone. He felt the same fears that were rife among the townspeople. Except for the Circle L hands his trade had waned to nothing.

Bottles had a huge red nose and beady little eyes in a fat face. He had a vivid imagination and the slight swagger of a little man who tries to cover up his own weaknesses. Folks figured he wasn't much smarter than the law allowed, but he had sense enough to make money out of the saloon business when times were good.

Two fingers on his left hand were missing. He used to boast that he had lost them in the War. What he didn't tell was that he had lost them trying to get out of a crap game alive years ago in Galveston.

This night Bottles poured himself a drink. He took several to quiet the fluttering fear in his heart. He heard the creak of wagon wheels a little later and went to the window. A covered wagon was stopping outside. It was loaded with household furniture and fear. A milk cow and calf were tied to the tail-gate. On the spring seat was Sandy McPherson and the huddled, tragic figures of his wife and daughter.

McPherson drew the team to a stop, climbed down and came inside. Bottles set out the whisky and refused to take any money. McPherson seemed to be cracking under the deadly poison of his hate and sorrow. He had never recovered from the shock of the death of his younger brother.

After drinking he wiped off his grizzled chin. "This'll be my last, Bottles," he said unsteadily. "Me'n Ma and Sarah is pullin' out tonight."

"Lamont pay yuh anything for yore land, Mac?"

"Stole it, cuss him! Stole the very heart out of us for two bits an acre. But there was no other way, Bottles. It was that or starve."

"Where yuh goin' now, Mac?"

"Don't know. Only, God willin', we'll find some place west of here where mebbe we can find peace. *Adios*, Bottles."

Bottles tried to swallow the lump in his throat, but failed. He watched McPherson depart and heard the creak of the wagon wheels and something went out of his life forever. In a quavering whisper of anguish he said aloud:

"Why did he do it? Why did he? I never figgered Delaney was that kind of a skunk."

Silence crept over the town. The blood-red moon shone down like a blighted benediction until storm clouds covered it and the night got dark. Distant thunder began rumbling, growing louder with the suddenness of an early spring storm. Smell of the mesquite filled the still air.

BOTTLES listened. He heard the slow hoof-beats outside that came to a stop at his door. Spurs jingled faintly. Then the door opened and a tall, keen-eyed man entered. There was something different about him from most men. He had a slow, gentle way of speaking and eyes that seemed to look clear through a person.

"I'm L. H. McNelly," he said quietly.

Bottles gulped. "The devil—er—I mean not Captain McNelly of the Rangers?"

"The same, friend. Now I'd like to ask some questions."

"Yuh mean—"

"Tell me what yuh know about Tex Delaney."

Bottles swallowed hard. He told of the bushwhackings and raids he had heard about. He mentioned Juan Cortina, and Chili; Captain Strang's murder and Delaney's escape. After that the Army Post had been removed and the soldiers had left.

Bottles explained how, that dreary night in December, the two Pike boys had returned to the valley on lathered horses. With them had come Chili, trying to get a word in edgewise but with nobody listening to him. The Pike boys told of Delaney joining the wagon-train and how they were suspicious of him. Chaffee had told them that one of his men had overheard Delaney and Chili plotting to steal the hides.

Stunned by this news, Bowie Hoskins and the other Valley men had taken to the trail. They had ridden day and night, but got there too late. They found some of the wagons burned, the remaining Valley boys with their bodies full of bullet-holes. Chino had been dead among them. They had found horse tracks showing where raiders, apparently, had swooped down on the camp from the north.

Dumb-struck by the brutality of it all, the Valley men had buried the bodies and gone on. They found Chaffee and a gent named Silver, who had been wounded, at Lamont's hide and tallow factory in Rockport. They had managed to escape, but were scared witless. It was a ghastly story they told of mutiny and death.

When the raiders had struck, they said Delaney had turned on his own Valley men. With the raiders' help Delaney had doubled the load of some of the wagons, burned the others. He and some of the raiders had driven like mad on into Rockport. There, to a clerk at Lamont's plant, they had sold their hides, collected the money and vanished. After checking with the clerk to make certain that Delaney had collected the money, the Valley men had returned home, broke and ruined.

"It was an awful shock to them, Captain," Bottles said. "They'd have trusted Delaney with their very souls, I reckon. Always seemed like an upright feller to me. But yuh never know. Never know. Well, when the Valley men come back there was nothin' for 'em to do but sell and get out, or starve. Some of them have sold and gone. Others are tryin' to tough it out. Lamont has money. He could stand the loss. He's been buyin' up land since then at two bits an acre. It's rocky times in Texas, Captain McNelly. Rocky times."

"And this Chili Cortina. Where did he go?"

"He's still out at Delaney's Hors-shoe Ranch. Some of the Valley men wanted to hang him, but Bowie Hoskins stopped 'em. Reckon yuh couldn't blame him if his old man is a killin' Mexican."

"And Starr, who married Captain Strang?"

"Closed the restaurant, there bein' no trade. She's still here, they tell me, livin' in the back end of the place. But word is that she's leavin' for Saint Louie."

"There's a new brand of law comin' to the Brasada, Bottles," Captain McNelly said grimly. "Ranger law! I've combed the trail from here to Rockport and checked in ad-

joinin' states to find trace of Tex Delaney. It seems like he's vanished from the earth. But I'm not givin' up till he's found. Yuh're in a position here to help me. I'm goin' to swear yuh in for special duty."

"The devil!" Bottles beamed. "Think of that! Me a Ranger. Always wanted to be one, I did. Ranger Lawrence!"

They talked in low tones, neither of them turning as a buckboard rattled past outside. Captain McNelly gave Bottles his instructions. The little barkeep nodded vigorously. Later, when Captain McNelly left the saloon, he went out to his horse at the hitch-rack, mounted and rode towards the Horseshoe Ranch. . . .

The rumbling thunder grew louder over the Valley, like the echo of gunfire that was bound to come. Dismal lamplight glowed at the windows of the Horseshoe ranchhouse. Two buckboards and some saddled horses stood in the front yard. Inside the living room Bowie Hoskins sat in a straight-backed chair, his shoulders bent, his sunken eyes staring with hopelessness. Across from him sat Sam Whitehead, owner of the general store, and Doc Tidwell, whose stringy neck seemed thinner.

PARSON CRIPPS stood in the center of the room, Bible in hand, his soulful eyes upon the two people who faced him. One of them was Chili Cortina, his boots tallowed and his faded overalls washed and ironed. At his side stood an attractive Mexican girl, all dressed in white and wearing a veil.

"I'm not of your faith, Chili," Parson Cripps intoned. "Nor is Miss Gomez. But if it is your wish that I marry you, it shall be done."

"Eet ess my weesh," said Chili. "An' Maria's."

Parson Cripps had heard Chili say earlier that this was the way Tex Delaney would have wanted it. And the long-legged parson was accustomed to the strange sentiment among Mexicans.

"You two are here tonight to join in holy wedlock. . . ."

His voice droned on and on, the lamplight playing over his sad face and glowing in the eyes of the witnesses who were standing now.

"You take this woman, Chili Cortina, to be your lawful wedded wife, to hold and cherish, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?"

"*Si.* I do."

"And you, Maria Gomez, do you take this man as your lawful wedded husband, to honor and obey. . . ."

A tear dropped from her cheek. Her full red lips quivered as she nodded and whispered:

"*Si,* senor. I do."

Parson Cripps concluded in a husky whisper. He closed the Bible in his hands and touched the bride's forehead with his lips, pronouncing his blessing. The men shook Chili's hand.

"Good luck, Chili," they said. "We ain't holdin' nothin' agin you."

When the newly married couple got ready to go, Chili faced the group of men. He tried to keep the tremble out of his voice, but it was hard.

"Maria and I weel live weeth her father across the Line," he said. "Bowie, I leave thees ranch weeth you to do as yuh please. I—we thank you all *por* comin' to our weddings tonight. Some day we weel ride back. P'raps. And some day, senors, by the holy Saints, yuh weel believe me when I say that Tex Delaney ees ennocent."

"*Adios,* Chili," the men murmured. "*Adios,* Maria."

They walked out to the gallery as Chili hurried his bride to the waiting buckboard. He and his wife waved as they drove away, with the thunder growing louder and louder and lightning flashing through the thickening heavens.

Chili drove hard, bundling Maria in the old slicker he had brought along. At the river, Maria's father and her many cousins had promised to meet them. In the great dining hall of the Gomez *hacienda* there would be barbecued beef and wine, feasting and celebrating until noon the next day.

Chili would have a chance to forget his ugly memories for a few hours. He would drink the red wine and sing the old Irish ditties that his mother had taught him.

CHAPTER XIV

Ranger Law

REACHING Mosquero Chili Cortina drove past the lighted windows of Bottles Lawrence's saloon. Before the false-front of the Lone Star Restaurant he stopped the team, leaped to the ground. As he was lifting Maria from the buckboard seat he turned in time to see a tall man depart from the saloon, mount his horse and ride away.

"Come, Maria *chiquita,*" he whispered.

They hurried around to the rear where Starr lived. Shades were drawn at the windows, but thin slivers of lamplight escaped beneath them. Chili pecked lightly on the

door. When it opened Starr stood framed in the dismal block of light. On the bed behind her lay her packed carpet-bag. She was dressed for traveling. There was a small bonnet on her head, half framing the pale beauty of her face.

"Come in, Chili." She smiled wanly. "And you, Maria. God bless you both."

They entered her room, closing the door behind them. Chili fumbled with his hat, looking at Starr and looking away. He found it hard expressing himself.

"We wanted to tell yuh *adios*, Starr," he said.

"I was waiting, Chili," Starr replied, smiling.

"Yuh steel plan to leave?"

"On the midnight stage to San Antonio, Chili. From there I'll go to St. Louis. It's the only way. There's nothing for me here. I hate it with all my heart and soul. In St. Louis I'll find happiness—and forget." Starr paused, then her steady gaze met the little Mexican's. "Only one thing before we part, Chili."

"And that?"

"Did you kill Captain Strang that night?"

"I—"

"I want the truth, Chili! It makes no difference to me now, but I want the truth. Somehow I'll never make myself believe that Tex did it."

Chili's head was shaking, and the truth lay in his eyes.

"I am mos' positeeve Tex did not do eet, Starr. Nor deed I. Remember that night I came to see you. We were so worry. You show me thee gon that had belong to Strang. We talk eet over. Then I slips the gon into thee weendow of his cell and ron. Tex, he deed not have time to get to Strang and keel heem. But no wan would leesten to me."

"I believe you, Chili. I just wanted to make certain. It's something I'll never understand. It's like them saying that Tex murdered those men on the trail and escaped with the hide money. I'll never believe that, either."

"I know," Chili said sadly. "I know."

"You didn't tell Dad that I was leaving tonight, did you?"

Chili shook his head.

"I'm glad, Chili. I haven't got the strength to face Dad. I'm a coward, I guess. I want to get away without him knowing it. In St. Louis maybe I can get work and make enough money to help him and the kids."

Starr's eyes were moist when she told Chili and Maria good-by. She returned to the bed and sat down, waiting for midnight, listening to the roll of thunder. . . .

Out at the Horseshoe ranchhouse, Bowie, Parson Cripps, Doc Tidwell and Sam Whitehead heard the same approaching storm. Memories, ugly and unpleasant, tortured them. They looked at one another and looked away. They tried to hide their feelings, but they were there for all to see. Finally Bowie went into the kitchen. When he returned he was holding a jug and several tin cups.

"Chili told me to take it with us," he said. "It's some whisky that old Frank left behind. Let's have a drink, then go. Gettin' late."

They all drank, except Parson Cripps. He watched them with all the pitiable sadness of a man whose faith is all but crumbling.

"You men planning to leave the Valley?" he asked.

Bowie wiped his lips. "McPherson and that new family have gone, Parson. But me, I'm stayin'. Me and some of the other men are goin' to stay. If I'm ruined I want to die fightin'. This is my home here. It's worth dyin' for."

"Amen," Parson Cripps said reverently.

They heard it then. A ghostly sound of hoof-beats that came on and on. Both heels clumped on the gallery. Spurs jangled. Every man in the room had his eye on the door. The knob began turning and the heavy door opened. A man stood there.

Bowie's half-filled tin cup fell clatteringly to the floor. If Frank Delaney had risen from the grave and confronted him he could not have been more shocked. In a ghostly whisper of amazement and gladness, he said:

. . *"Tex!"*

DELANEY stood framed against the black night outside. Not the clean-shaven, bitter-eyed brush-popper who had ridden out of Mosquero with the law on his trail, but a great bearded, sunken-eyed scarecrow of a man with fists for mauling. His coat and pants were faded and torn, his boots worn and shapeless. About his lean waist was strapped an old six-shooter.

"Tex," Bowie repeated incredulously. "Where—"

"I'll explain later, Bowie. Where's Lamont—and Chaffee?"

"Why—why they're at the Circle L, I reckon."

"No they're not, Bowie. I've been watchin' their ranch for the past hour."

"Tex!" Bowie fairly screamed. "In heaven's name, man, what's happened?"

They were all standing, staring. Delaney started to say something. He saw the men staring beyond him. He whirled as a gun was jabbed into his ribs and a tall man with keen eyes said in a grim slow way:

"Just hold whatever you have to say, Delaney, for the court to hear. I want you for murder!"

There was no chance to escape. Delaney saw that. Beyond his captor he glimpsed Bottles Lawrence, face pale and a big gun in his trembling fist.

"Who are you?" he demanded of the tall man.

"I'm Captain McNelly of the Rangers, Delaney, sent here to clear up the cussadest mess I ever put my foot into. For a week now I've been under cover around here, figgerin' that yuh might return some day. I'd hate like thunder to kill yuh, cowboy. But I will if yuh make one wrong move. Now come on. Get on your hoss."

Delaney had heard of this famous man-hunter. Here was no glory-hunter, but a rock-jawed man who believed in every letter of the law. To buck him was hopeless. Making him listen to the truth was Delaney's only chance.

In a sudden rush of emotion, Delaney clipped:

"*Bueno,* Ranger, I'll go with yuh. But yuh're goin' to listen to *my* story. I came back here for only one reason—to kill Pierre Lamont and Chaffee, two of the lowest snakes that ever ruined a range!"

Captain McNelly smiled tolerantly. "I'll be glad to listen to your story, Delaney," he said coldly. "In my headquarters in town. If yuh can prove your statements there'll be other arrests made pronto. Come on."

Quickly the Ranger removed Delaney's gun from its holster. Not knowing the temper of the other men in the house, he hurried Delaney out to his horse. Bowie and Sam Whitehead started to follow, but Captain McNelly ordered them back.

"Sorry, gents," he barked firmly. "I was ordered to make this a secret investigation. And such it will be. If I need yuh for witnesses, yuh'll be called. All right, Delaney, start for Mosquero and ride slow. Bottles and I will be right behind yuh with our guns. Get goin'!"

Delaney set the pace, shaking with the terrible knowledge that he had blundered into the hands of the law. McNelly would never believe his story of Chaffee's grisly treachery. McNelly would want proof. And that Delaney could never get until he was given a free rein to obtain proof in his own way.

Temptation to make a run for it assailed him. But some thread of better judgment held him. For days at the Mexican herder's hut, hovering between life and death, hate had kept him alive. After that, waiting for the strength to return to Mustang Valley, he had suffered all the tortures of the inferno, waiting, praying for the chance to clear his name. Now—

He tried to quiet the raging turmoil in him. His only hope lay in winning McNelly to his side before he was spirited out of the country to stand trial. Questions plagued him, but he held his tongue.

It was one of the toughest ordeals of Delaney's life, that trip into Mosquero. McNelly and Bottles rode behind him, their six-shooters trained on his back. Thunder kept up the cannonading, the hills flinging back the echoes. Then a brisk wind came up, smelling of rain.

Mosquero lay dark, quiet, like something dead. Back of the old two-story Commercial House, McNelly guided his prisoner. Before the drouth and war it had been a thriving tavern. Since then it had gone to rack and ruin. Weeds had grown through the cracks of the rotten porch planks. Some of the front windows were broken and dust lay thick inside it.

AT McNELLY'S low order they dismounted, trailing reins. With his gun in Delaney's back, he nodded toward some ancient outside stairs.

"Up them, Delaney!" he gritted. "And hurry."

There was no alternative but to do as told. Delaney mounted the steps, the two men at his back. On the landing, Bottles stepped in front of him, shoved open a creaking door. A gust of musty, foul air greeted them. Shadows moved. In a blinding flash of weird light two other men took shape.

"That you, Cap?" a voice challenged.

"And with Tex Delaney himself, Dawson. Light the lantern."

Lantern light suddenly shoved back the inky shadows. A long corridor opened up before Delaney. A door stood open to his right. The gun in his back prodded him through it into a small, dusty room. The man with the lantern placed it on a box. In one corner three blankets had been spread.

The two men with McNelly stared hard at Delaney. Bottles stood in one corner of the room, the six-shooter danging in his hand at his side. McNelly smiled grimly.

"Yuh're prob'ly wondering about a good many things, Delaney," he said grimly. "Let me start off by tellin' yuh that yuh're goin' to be treated fair. These two men are Rangers of my company. We've been livin' up here in secrecy for a week, watchin', gatherin' all the information possible. Bottles here has been sworn in for special duty."

"That's right!" Bottles beamed.

"I'll do the talkin', Bottles!" McNelly reprimanded.

"Shore, shore, Cap."

"Now, Delaney, what were yuh sayin' about Lamont and his foreman Chaffee?"

Delaney stood rigid. Beyond the men watching him were two windows, covered

tightly with heavy blankets. Somewhere he thought he heard a faint whisper of sound.

"Lamont," he said, voice brittle, "and Chaffee are behind the raids here in the Valley. That I'm shore of. And under Lamont's orders, Chaffee and his killers gunned me on the trail, left me for dead."

"Then yuh claim yuh didn't go on into Rockport, sell the hides and abscond with the money—that yuh had no hand in the raid?"

It all came clear to Delaney like a smashing blow in the stomach.

"Cuss it, man! No!" he said huskily.

"Did yuh kill Captain Strang?" McNelly fired.

"No!"

"Who did?"

"I don't know."

"But you and Chili Cortina did escape from prison together?"

"Yes."

"Delaney," McNelly said grimly, "I'd like to believe yore story. Somehow I don't believe yuh could stoop to the rotten deeds yuh're blamed for. I'm goin' ahead with this investigation until I'm plumb satisfied. But in the meantime, I'm sendin' yuh to Austin with these two men of mine—tonight! I—"

He stopped as the corridor door bust open with a crash. Delaney whirled. Tad Hoskins crouched there, eyes blazing wildly, a stub-barreled shotgun gripped in his hands.

"Don't move, none of yuh!" he cried. "Drop yore gun, Cap, you and the others, or I'll blow yuh apart. Lift yore hands. That's right!"

Delaney leaped back to side him, after scooping up one of the Ranger's fallen guns.

"Tad!" he fairly yelled.

"And not my ghost either, Tex!" the boy quavered. "But for a time tonight I thought I was seein' yores. Let's go, pard, while the goin's good. I figgered these gents wouldn't believe yuh. But I do!"

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CHAPTER XV

Owl Hoot Trail

McNELLY and the others stood with lifted arms, not daring the reckless kid's wrath. The guns lay at their feet. Bottles looked as if he had been stabbed in the back.

"Yuh're makin a terrible mistake, son," McNelly rapped.

"It won't top yores, Cap!" Tad retorted furiously.

Swiftly Delaney gathered up the men's guns, keeping one leveled. He backed into the door, primed and deadly.

"The boy's right, McNelly," he said softly. "I'm leavin' here tonight with one idea in mind—smashin' the truth out of Lamont. And even Ranger law ain't goin' to stop me! We're leavin' now, and if any of yuh give chase I'll shoot to kill!"

None of the men moved. They read the death promise in Delaney's eyes as he kept backing. In the dark corridor he suddenly whirled, shoved Tad outside and down the steps ahead of him. Dumping the extra guns to the ground, he raced for his horse, flung astride and spurred away. Tad followed suit, clinging to his shotgun, his face ashen in the darkness, but his eyes glowing with triumph.

"Take the lead, pard!" he whooped. "I'll cover the rear!"

Delaney grinned in spite of himself, thrilling to the boy's courage. Pursuit, he knew, would be swift. McNelly, chagrined at his failure, would hang and rattle with all the bulldog determination for which he was known.

For miles Delaney held the killing pace, heading straight eastward across the Valley. The damp wind leashed at them and the lightning crackled like gunfire. Then huge drops of rain began falling until it was coming down in sheets.

The storm broke in all its fury by the time they reached the distant hills. In the blinding, drenching downpour, Delaney sought the scant shelter of an overhanging rock. Here he flung down, calling to Tad. The boy left his horse and raced to the canopy, a bedraggled little figure in his rain-plastered clothes.

Above the howl of the storm Delaney raised his voice to make himself heard.

"We'd best do some planin' now, Tad. First off, do yuh know anything about Lamont?"

"Nothin' but what I already knowed, pard. He's a skunk, that's all. Him an' Chaffee both."

For weeks Tad had done some spying of his own. Unwilling to believe anything but that Delaney was innocent, he had spent his days watching the Circle L, listening, doing a job that his father might have done had old Bowie been more suited for a lawman's badge. But as a reward for his work Tad had learned nothing of any consequence.

"That buzzard Lamont left the Circle L a few days ago, pard, headin' east. That means he's back in New Orleans. See, he comes and goes. Ain't seen hair nor hide of Chaffee for some time either. Don't know where that skunk could of went."

Tad's words poured from him. He missed no detail of all that had happened since Delaney's absence. Bitterly he told of the crimes laid to Delaney. His was much the same story that Bottles had told Captain McNelly earlier in the evening. Starr was leaving for St. Louis, he said. She had confided in him to that extent.

And tonight, hearing that Chili was to be married to Maria Gomez at the Horseshoe ranchhouse, Tad had sneaked over to peer in the window. He had heard Delaney ride up. Not knowing who it was, Tad had hidden. Then when McNelly and Bottles had taken their prisoner into Mosquero, Tad had trailed them.

"Whoa up here, pard," Tad said abruptly. "I didn't mean to do all the talkin'. Let me hear yore side of the story."

Delaney gave him the highlights of all that had happened. And Tad sat with mouth open, staring at him.

"The dirty skunks!" he croaked. "They can't—"

"They've already done their dirt, if that's what yuh mean, Tad!" Delaney muttered. "Now it's up to me to find 'em."

"I'll go with yuh!"

"No, Tad. Not unless yuh're afraid of McNelly catchin' up with yuh."

"Afraid of that? Shucks, pard! T'ain't that! I can play hide and seek with McNelly and his men for a month in this Valley. I know every cave in these hills and I can cache enough grub to last."

"Then you stay here, Tad. Yuh'll be doin' me a bigger turn by watchin' events in the Valley and reportin' to me when I come back."

"But yuh *will* come back?" Tad asked fretfully.

"I'll be back," Delaney said grimly.

THEIR hands met in a firm grip. Tad was afraid to trust his voice to say more. Delaney strode to his horse and mounted. Then with a wave of his hand he rode away, guiding his horse through the brush-covered hills by the vivid flashes of lightning. By daybreak he wanted as many miles between him and Mosquero as possible.

So Delaney, with the stigma of traitor and murderer on his name, started back over the Texas trail, hiding by day and riding by nights. Rockport, then New Orleans, was his destination. Finding Lamont became an obsession with him that drove him on. For Lamont, he knew, was the brains—the sinister power—behind all the trouble. Chaffee was merely Lamont's hired killer.

Word of the ghastly deeds of which he was accused had spread fast, Delaney was soon to learn. The State had placed a bounty on his head, patently to make him an example and to discourage lawlessness. Thus Delaney was forced to avoid the scattered ranches that ordinarily would have offered him lodging and food.

Living off of early berries and what wild game he could shoot, he went on, losing track of the days and distance. Weariness deviled him, and Jean Lamont's image was ever a source of annoyance. That she could be of the same flesh and blood of the man whose dastardly cunning had played such havoc seemed impossible. Yet such was the case.

Twice Delaney missed capture by a hair's breadth. The last time was when the trail made a sharp bend and he was at the campfire of three men before he knew it. The hang of their guns, their bearded hard-lined faces marked them for outlaws. In that hazy dawn they leaped to their feet, as surprised as Delaney. Whether they recognized him from the law's description he would never know.

In the hail of lead he roared away, bent low and shooting back to discourage pursuit. From then on he avoided the trail entirely, staying in the hills. There were days when the warm spring sun shone down upon the greening hills and brush. Nights that were chill with the last breath of winter.

Then came the drizzling night when he began circling Copana Bay and he smelled the salt air. Through swamps and flooded bayous, lush with reedy growth and vines and clamoring of frogs, he made his way until from a hilltop he saw the glimmering lights of Rockport. On the outskirts of the town he played his luck the limit by riding boldly into a teamster's camp.

He sold his horse and gear to a buckskin oldster who was obviously none too friendly with the law himself. Pocketing the money, Delaney went ahead on foot to Rockport.

Rockport! Gulf depot and melting pot for a State that beckons of riches and adventure, strident and seething with an industry that had sprung up overnight—the hide and

tallow factories. Here, where ships had not docked in fifty years, was a bustling metropolis, thriving with the export of hides, horns, barrels of tallow and hogsheads of beef.

Thousands of cattle—sea-lions—cramped in hurriedly improvised corrals, awaiting slaughter or shipment to New Orleans or Cuba. From Corpus Christi to Galveston it was the same, roaring to a trade that sickened the dyed-in-the-wool cowmen, but which offered their only salvation. Later, when beef prices should come back and trails opened to the north, this sordid industry would die. These packeries of clapboard and pine would decay in their own stench.

Adding to the confusion came the moan and bawl of cattle from the wharf pens, the blast of boat whistles, the raucous bawl of teamsters. All a man needed to open a cannery was a little ground, some barrels of salt, a slaughter-shack, pens, vats, pulleys and butcher knives. But getting them was another matter. Money was scarce. Horses brought ready cash. But cattle were a drug on the market.

An ox-cart piled high with beef hides rolled along the muddy street toward the water-front. Through the teeming human tide the bearded buckskin driver recognized an old friend.

"Which factory is offerin' the most, Jeff?" he bawled.

"Waugh!" roared back a cowman. "It's nip and tuck, friend. Lamont is still biddin' highest with a dollar raise per plew—makin' eight. Who would have thought we'd come to this?"

"Not me, pardner. But anything till we can get on our feet. Word is out that the northern markets are beginning to want beef."

The stamp and roar of the canneries working day and night shifted to care for the influx of new herds. Back of them, where ducks and geese forged, acres of discarded carcasses, smelling to high heaven. Shacks and tents on the outskirts, fires and camps of teamsters and herders. Brush-poppers and buckskin men, Mexicans and cattlemen, gamblers, carpet-baggers and adventurers, gambling, drinking, trading and selling.

VICE rampant, and men from all States milling in the mud and stench and rain, imbued with the spirit of rivalry and lust. Back on the hills the homes of the elite, as if striving to lift themselves above the squalor and vice below.

The main street, deep with mud, flanked with stores and saloons were packed and overflowing. And the water-front was stacked high with cargo and hogsheads, seething with running roustabouts and murky in the glow of huge lanterns.

A steamer nosed into the landing, the bell clanging orders to the men in the engine-room. Two deck hands stood ready with the hawsers, and from the pilot-house window leaned the captain, bellowing orders and cursing. Slicker-clad sailors and firemen appeared on deck.

There was the clatter and slam of opening hatches; the churn and roar of paddle-wheels in the water. Passengers peered from the lighted windows of their cabins, awed and mayhap frightened by the turmoil and confusion below them.

Delaney shouldered his way through the teeming throng to the water-front, impelled by the force of his mission. His plans were laid. From a grizzled muleteer he got his directions to Lamont's factory, which edged the water-front. It was nothing more than a huge office in front, with the barnlike structures of the factory and pens in the rear.

The place was a beehive of activity. Buyers from other ports and booted cowmen swarmed in and out of the front door, doing business with several clerks inside. Back of the long counter were desks, huge iron safes and wooden files. One clerk, plainly the manager of the office, stepped up to the counter opposite Delaney.

"What's your business, my friend?" he asked surlily.

He was a pasty-faced young man with thin hair and nervous eyes, offensive with his own importance. Delaney watched him closely, tense for any sign of recognition. There was none on the clerk's part. Not then.

"I'm huntin' Pierre Lamont," Delaney said quietly.

"Mr. Lamont," the clerk snapped unpleasantly, "is in New Orleans." He stopped abruptly, catching his breath, his face paling. "Who—who are you?" he managed.

He was staring intently into Delaney's gaunt, bearded face.

"Bill Smith," Delaney said coolly. "Rancher from San Patricio. Why, friend?"

The clerk smiled, coughed uneasily and apologized. He said he guessed he'd made a mistake.

"Took you for another man," he mumbled. "Is that all you wish to know?"

"That's all," Delaney clipped, and walked out.

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CHAPTER XVI

Mutiny at Sea

LIKE a released arrow, Delaney sped toward the loaded wharves. Beyond question, he knew the clerk had recognized him from the description passed along. Bitterly he cursed the circumstances that prevented him learning more. But from the brief encounter he had learned much. That clerk had sworn to the Valley men that Delaney was the man to whom he had paid the hide money.

Behind some piled cargo, Delaney took hiding. Nor was he a minute too soon. A policeman entered Lamont's office at a run. In just a moment he was back outside on the plank walk. He blew a whistle. Two other uniformed lawmen joined him, held an excited confab, then scattered in search. The word was out:

"Tex Delaney is still alive. Get him!"

Delaney whirled as one of the lawmen started toward the wharves. Then his blood froze. Like a huge wall the boxes and barrels blocked him on both sides—and the lawman was coming towards him! Desperately he plunged through a narrow aisle between the boxes, coming head on with the prow of a docked steamer.

With a start he glimpsed the ship's name painted on the hull. It was the *Lucy May!* Pursuit was dogging him and he had no choice. Remembering this was Stoker McGinnis' boat, he made a dash for the gangplank. From the Texas deck came a muffled challenge, but Delaney went on, hurtling over the deck load and down the narrow catwalk alongside the engine room. Then down the ladder to the stoke-hole he raced, ears pounding with the hiss and roar of escaping steam.

Figures confronted him as he whirled—brawny, hairy-chested men, naked to the waist and gleaming with sweat. Men with shovels in their hands, pausing before the open doors of the huge fire-boxes, startled by the intrusion. Then the largest of the group let out a bellowing exclamation.

"Tex! Blast me, is it ye or ain't it?"

Relief gusted through Delaney. "It's me, Stoker."

"And what might be the rush, me fine friend?"

"The law, Stoker! Quick, where can I hide?"

Stoker McGinnis whooped with genuine joy.

"The law!" he boomed. "By the blasted Blarney Stone, bucko, are the bluecoats still after ye? Well, if they are, let 'em come! I've told ye before an' I'll—tell ye agin—who's the Law?"

"Quick, Stoker!"

"Back here with ye, my friend. And if the Law comes a-snoopin', me'n the other stokes will bat 'em over the heads with our shovels."

Boot heels pounded across the upper deck, clattered down the engine-room catwalk. Delaney dived through a black doorway into the coal-bin as the chief officer peered down into the stoke-hole.

"A fugitive is reported as comin' aboard!" the man shouted. "Any of you seen hide or hair of him?"

"And who might be wantin' to sneak into such a black hole as this?" Stoker roared back belligerently. "Fugitive, be blowed! We got to raise some steam if we're shovin' off!"

The officer vanished. Breathing easier, Delaney crept out of hiding at Stoker's bidding.

[*Turn page*]

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign

Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

"Squat and rest easy, Tex, boy," Stoker grinned. "We'll be movin' in a few minutes. Then ye'll be safe, and ye can tell me everything."

Delaney was content to hunker in a corner while the other men worked. The three stokers with McGinnis went about their chores half-heartedly, grumbling and cursing the name of Lamont. Overhead feet clumped across the deck, the steamer's whistle blew three sharp blasts. A bell began ringing. There came the muted creak of hawsers, the clank of lever bars from the engine room, the rumbling of the gangplank being hauled in.

Shouted orders carried faintly from the pilot-house. Then the great paddle-wheels began churning, and Delaney felt the sway and rock as the steamer turned and caught the tide.

"More steam!" came the snarled order from the engine room.

One of the stokers beside McGinnis turned, eyes glinting in the red glow of the fire-box.

"Steam!" he raged. "I'll steam yuh! Cuss this scow and the skunk that owns it! But yuh can tell the skipper this'll be the last!"

One of them produced a bottle, a luxury taboo on board. It passed from hand to hand, but Stoker shook his head.

"I'll pass it, boys," he said grimming. "We'll need one sober head, if our plan is to work. Touch light on it, me buckos!"

THEY killed the bottle and tossed it aside. Delaney missed none of their talk and actions, and wondered. Here was mutiny afoot, and no effort to conceal it. Plainly these men hated Lamont with the same venom as Delaney hated the man. Stoker McGinnis shoveled coal in grim silence, deep in thought.

Delaney felt the pulse and throb of the boat. When the steam was up the stokers laid aside their shovels for a brief respite. Stoke hurried to Delaney's side.

"In here," he said significantly.

He stepped back where the coal was piled high. And Delaney sensed the big man's troubled spirit. In a husky whisper Stoker began firing questions. Tensely, Delaney told briefly of practically everything that had happened to him since the night he and Chili had met Stoker in New Orleans. It was a story that made the big Irishman's eyes pop.

"And this clerk back there at the factory, Tex," he queried. "Why didn't ye shoot him? He'd been one of the skunks out of the way."

"That clerk is small fry, Stoker. He'll keep. Right now my big gamble is reachin' Lamont. Him and Chaffee are the only two men who can clear my name. If my guess is right they're the ones responsible for the raids in Mustang Valley. They're back of my dad's murder someway, somehow."

Stoker's eyes glowed with hate. "I heard about one of Lamont's wagon-trains bein' raided, but that was all. It does us good, Tex—us boys who are workin' and slavin' in this black hole to make Lamont rich. Any misfortune to the cussed Frenchman comes as good news to us."

"What do yuh mean, Stoker?"

"Ye ain't blind, me boy."

Then Stoker was gripping Delaney's arm, the flood waters of his bitter passions breaking in a torrent of words.

"Mutiny, me fine bucko! That's what ye're goin' to witness. None of my makin', no. But I'm fallin' in with it, heart and soul, to help wreck the skunk that has torn out your heart and who is deprivin' us men of our just pay. Don't stare, Tex. Listen. In another hour we'll be through Aransas Pass, headin' across the Gulf fer New Orleans. When we hit The Pass that's the signal to strike!"

"Stoker, don't be a fool! That's no way to smash Lamont. Mutiny on the high seas means prison!"

"And who's afraid of prison, Tex?" Stoker retorted. "Certainly none of us. Listen—for two round trips now our pay has been kept from us. Food is rotten. The captain shrugs an' feeds us promises. We've got our craws full of it, Tex! These men ye see yonder are tough—the dregs of seven infernos. And blood and gunfire ain't goin' to stop 'em.

"When the time comes, Tex, we're takin' the ship over. Shore they'll kill the captain. I got backwashed into the deal and there's no backin' out now, me boy. Mutiny has spread like fire across the whole ship. They're primed and waitin'. Once we get in control, we're headin' straight for Galveston. There we'll sell the hides aboard and collect the money that's due us."

They saw the shadow of a man and turned. One of the stokers faced them, eyes glowing like hot coals in his smeared, sweaty face. He was a thick-chested giant with a six-shooter in one paw. Above the throb of the engine he rasped:

"We ain't waitin' to clear the Pass, Stoker. That's the word that drifted down. Get yore gun and come on. How does this jigger stand—with us or agin us?"

"With us, Blackie!" Stoker thundered. "Let's go!"

In one bound Stoker leaped to a corner where he had cached his gun. Scooping it up, he faced Delaney as the other men scrambled up the ladder. He was the wild fighting Irishman of old, driven by passions that make men smash and kill. All the arguments in the world could not stop him now. He wanted vengeance and was taking the easy, quick way to get it.

"Come on, Tex! Let's wreck Lamont!"

Like a raging bull he went up the ladder as yells and the crack of pistol shots came from the deck above. And, caught in the undertow of that savagery, Delaney followed, his own pistol palmed. Behind Stoker he hit the cargo deck to find firemen, engineers and deck-hands swarming to the shelter of boxes, their guns flaming red. From the pilot-house came the scream of a man in mortal agony.

"That's the chief officer," a crouched mutineer shrilled. "Now get the cap!"

HIS body jarred, the words choking in his throat as lead crashed into his body from the bridge. Delaney dived out of the line of fire, flattening behind a stanchion as lead ripped into the deck about him.

Stoker, bellowing and cursing, led a small group of mutineers toward the ladder that led to the passenger deck. Gunfire from the bridge dropped two of them. The line faltered and fell back.

Wild panic swept the ship from stem to stern. The paddle wheels kept churning and the black, foggy night closed in as lights went dead. On the bridge, near the pilot-house, the figure of the captain suddenly split over the rail, then fell with a crash to the lower deck. Then above that insane shouting, gunfire and confusion, rose a cry that fills seamen with horror.

"Fire! Fire! The hold's afire and there's powder on deck!"

Men charged past Delaney, trampling their own numbers in that mad rush to escape. Forgotten now was their lust to commandeer the boat and salvage the hides aboard. Getting into the water before the flames reached the powder drove them into a frenzy.

Those who could swim dived over the rail. Others sought frantically for life-preservers. Two life-boats were capsized in lowering them. The black shore-line was only half a mile away. Some would reach it safely. Others would sink in the inky waters of The Pass.

Delaney leaped to his feet. "Stoker!" he yelled.

Out of the hysteria and turmoil came the big Irishman's answering shout. Then he was at Delaney's side, yelling and pointing to the rail and clutching a life-preserver.

"Over the side, Tex! It's our only chance, boy! She'll blow any minute."

Smoke was already boiling out of the hatches. Lurid red flames sent an eerie glow from the engine-room door where the fire had spread. Delaney raced to the rail, kicking out of his boots. Only then did he hear above the bedlam—a woman's terror-filled scream from the passenger deck!

Delaney spun, as if struck with killer lead. Through the rolling thick smoke he glimpsed her, stumbling toward the ladder where flames were already leaping through the planking.

"Tex!" Stoker roared. "Ye'll never make it, boy! Come back, ye blunderin' bone-head! Come back!"

But Delaney did not turn. Across the deck he sprinted, the heat burning through the socks on his feet. Up the combing he clawed his way, choking in the smoke. Heat and flames licked at him, stung his hands and face and all but blinded him. On the passenger deck he scrambled to his feet—and collided with a girl's stumbling figure.

Grasping her in his arms, he took the long way down the steps, the cabin shielding him from the terrific heat. There Stoker was waiting for him, his face working in the fiendish glow.

From their holdings he had ripped two more preservers.

"Into 'em, Tex. Hurry!"

Then for the first time Delaney caught sight of the girl's white, terrified face. Their eyes met as she worked frantically to help him strap the belt about her waist. The shock was mutual.

Her lips moved. In that fleeting second she resembled a girl who was watching her prayers come true.

"Senor Texas!" she sobbed.

Delaney carried her to the rail, stricken with crisscross emotions. Over the side they went together, arm in arm, striking the black water with a jolt that tore the breath from their lungs. For a second they were under. Then the three of them bobbed to the surface and fought free of the churning paddles.

The burning, doomed craft went on, leaving white and roiling water in its wake. By its glare Delaney spotted the black shore-line and struck out toward it, keeping Jean Lamont in tow. Opposite him Stoker was swimming with powerful strokes, lending a hand.

"I can swim, Tex," Jean cried. "Even if I couldn't this belt would keep me afloat."

"Then foller!" Delaney snapped.

For what seemed hours they struggled against the tide, gasping and choking as waves slapped them. It was when Delaney found footing near the brushy shore-line that they heard the distant explosion of the burning ship. In the knee-deep water they turned, watched the torched hull go down.

Jean Lamont's face was drawn and ghostly pale.

"I hope," she said huskily, "I can find the men responsible for that crime some day. I'd like to see them hang."

"Me fine lady," Stoker said without turning his head, "yer lookin' at one of thim now."

CHAPTER XVII

Guns—And a Girl

JEAN LAMONT stared, white and shaken, her power of speech paralyzed for the moment. Fear and dread widened her eyes. In the drizzle and chill darkness her face revealed the ravages of her emotions. One hand fluttered to her throat as if her inner struggle were choking the life out of her.

"Texas!" she gasped.

"Just Tex, Jean!" he said coolly. "Tex Delaney."

She came nearer him, her eyes probing into his very soul. Her long dark hair hung wet and loose about her shoulders. Her long dress was plastered to her lithe body.

"*You* didn't have a hand in that mutiny, did you, Tex? I don't understand. It's all so confusing."

"Mebbe I had no hand in startin' the mutiny, Jean. But I made no move to stop it."

"But why—why?" she sobbed.

Delaney laughed bitterly. Then he sobered.

"Why," he said coldly. "Yuh ask why, when every honest man in the State cursed the name of yore father and his henchmen who have robbed and killed to satisfy their own greed."

She recoiled as if slapped in the face, a half-moan, half-sob escaping her.

"Tex, you don't know what you're saying. You're mad, completely mad."

"I'll say we're mad!" Stoker blurted.

"Let's go!" Delaney snapped.

"Tex—wait!" Jean ran to him, her teeth chattering from the cold and backlash of her emotions. "Tell me what's happened. Something is wrong. Terribly wrong. And I've got to know—right now. What were you doing on that boat? You're not a boatman. You were not in Dad's employ!"

"I was headin' for New Orleans, Jean—with one thing in mind. That was to kill yore father, Pierre Lamont!"

She had a grip on herself now. "At least you're truthful," she said scornfully.

"The truth bein' something yuh're probably not used to!" he rasped.

"We're getting nowhere, Tex."

"That's why I say we'd best start back."

"No, wait," she said coolly. "What's happened to you that makes you hate Dad so, Tex? I want to know."

"Are yuh still engaged to marry Jacques Chaffee, Jean?"

"Yes," she admitted miserably.

"Have yuh ever seen him?"

"Only his picture. Oh, you don't understand, Tex. I've grown up as an American. But Dad is French and still clings to the customs of his people. About a year ago he promised my hand to Jacques Chaffee. We were to have been married months ago, but I kept putting off the wedding. I didn't want even to know the man. When business brought him to New Orleans I ran away and visited a girl friend. Dad was furious."

"And word never got to yuh about me bein' supposed to rob one of the wagon-trains of hides?"

She was frankly puzzled. "I don't know what you mean?"

"Then I'll tell yuh this much, Jean. That night after I left yuh in the church I hurried back to Mustang Valley, with my *compadre,* Chili Cortina. I got there in time to find my own dad dead—murdered. Under yore father's orders, Jacques Chaffee and his gunhands were skinnin' every cow they could lay a hand to. Then yore father proposed a pool drive of the hides to Rockport, where he'd pay ten dollars a hide. Like a fool I listened to him, swallowed his rotten scheme, and was responsible for the other ranchers joinin' in with the idea.

"That drive gettin' through safely meant the salvation or ruin for the pool ranchers, Jean. With the law on my trail, I joined the wagon-train after it had started. Chaffee was wagon-boss. He murdered some of the boys and turned his guns on me. In the fight I went down and he left me for dead. But with his snaky schemin' he made it look as if *I* did the killin', stole the hides and collected the money for 'em. And he wouldn't have done it, Jean, without yore father bein' a part to it!"

"Only one thing, Tex," she said, startled.

"And that?"

"Dad has never been in Mustang Valley!"

Delaney stiffened.

"Oh, Tex!" Jean cried quickly. "Don't you see? You've got to believe me!" She was suddenly clutching his arm beseechingly.

"Yuh shore of that, Jean?"

"Dad has never been in Mustang Valley. *M'sieu* Chaffee made that investment of the ranch for him. Dad turned over the ranch to him, and many of his other affairs. For months Dad has been unwell, confined to his bed much of the time. I've known something was wrong, but he would never confide in me about his business. He's trusted men to handle his affairs. I don't understand it, Tex. But whatever has happened to make you hate Dad is—is not his fault!"

"Where is yore father, Jean?" Delaney clipped, his mind spinning. "And what were you doin' on that boat?"

JEAN tried to tell him, all her worry and agony and fears putting a sob in her voice. Pierre Lamont, hearing rumors that all was not well with his holdings, had got up from a sick bed to investigate his New Orleans office. Ugly hints that the men on his boats were being mistreated and robbed of their pay reached him. Then came the shocking revelation that his business was not financially sound.

"Dad is bankrupt, Tex," Jean hurried on. "It almost killed him when he learned that some of the men he trusted had robbed him. Then word came from *M'sieu* Chaffee for Dad to come to Mustang Valley immediately. Dad, his lawyer and a bodyguard, took the first boat out. He wouldn't listen to me going, but I sneaked aboard. They didn't discover me until we docked in Rockport two nights ago. Dad was afraid something might happen to me. So he put the boat captain in charge of me, with orders for me to be returned to New Orleans. I was locked in one of the cabins."

Jean went on to tell that when they reached The Pass tonight and the shooting started, she had smashed down the cabin door.

Delaney and Stoker stood thunder-struck. All she had revealed pounded through Delaney's brain. There were many things he didn't understand, but that Pierre Lamont—the real Lamont—was innocent of any part in the grisly happenings that had wrecked his life he was certain.

"Where's yore father now, Jean?" he asked hoarsely.

"Dad and the other two men were going to hire a coach and drive through to Mustang Valley, as *M'sieu* Chaffee instructed."

Delaney whirled on the bewildered Stoker. "It's the trail back for me, Stoker."

"And me, Tex, boy!" Stoker boomed. "And Hivin help thim who try to stop us. Blast me Irish soul, if I've wronged an innercent man I'll do everything in me power to right it!"

A low moan from Jean wrenched at Delaney's heart. He turned to see her swaying. Just as she fell he grabbed her into his arms. The grueling ordeal had been too much for her.

"A brave gurl, Tex," Stoker said admiringly.

"I knew that the first time I saw her, Stoker. She was freezin' to death while she was talkin'—and what she said was the truth. Come on. We've got to get help for her, pronto!"

With Jean in his arms, Delaney forged through the tangle of trees and brush edging the shore. Thorns and sharp rocks cut at his wet sock feet as he struck out inland. Miles around the Gulf the distant lights of Rockport glimmered like tiny fireflies in the drizzling darkness.

Delaney's heart pounded like a trip-hammer in his chest. Stoker offered to help him with his load but he shook his head. After a time they came out on a muddy, lonely road and turned toward town. When the lighted window of a roadside shack came into view Delaney broke into a run.

A yapping mongrel met them at the front gate. Stoker dashed ahead, beating his fist against the plank door. When it opened a grizzled dirt farmer faced them with a shotgun in the crook of his arm. He was wearing a long nightshirt and a pair of boots.

"What's all the hullabulloo about I'd like to know?" he bawled suspiciously. "What do yuh-all want?"

Delaney rapped back that their ship had sunk in The Pass. The three of them had managed to reach shore safely. The girl he was carrying needed attention.

"Well, darnation! Why didn't yuh say so sooner, stranger? Hey, Ma. Mebbe yuh'd best come lend a hand. Shipwrecked folks and a gal's been hurt. Come in. Come in."

Delaney carried Jean into a warm lamplit room, placed her limp figure on a sofa. Almost instantly a motherly gray-haired woman in nightclothes appeared to render help. As Delaney rubbed Jean's wrists the old man fetched a bottle of whisky. Delaney touched the bottle to Jean's lips. She coughed and choked.

Her eyes fluttered open. She started, then smiled wanly.

"I'm all right, Tex," she whispered. "That's twice you've seen me faint. You'll begin thinkin' I'm—I'm—"

"What difference does it make, Jean?"

"A great deal, Tex," she said queerly. "It has since that night in the church in New Orleans."

"Pore girl," the woman murmured. "While the menfolks stay here you come with me into the bedroom and get into some dry duds."

WHEN the two women went into the next room, Delaney and Stoker warmed themselves in front of the fireplace, listening to the farmer's running fire of talk. He raised truck and chickens for a living. Fearing the drenching downpour might have drowned some of his chickens he had got up to see about them when Stoker knocked on the door.

"What ship was you two fellers and the gal on when she went down?" he jabbered.

"The *Lucy May*," Delaney told him.

"Well, I'll swear."

Delaney asked if they could have lodging for the night. They'd be only too welcome, the farmer told him. Just then his wife

tiptoed into the room to say that Jean was in bed and sleeping.

"Just plumb tuckered out, she is," the woman said.

Later, Delaney and Stoker slept on blankets spread in front of the fireplace. But even in sleep Delaney found no surcease from his puzzling thoughts.

When dawn broke, gloomy and chill from fog and rain, he and Stoker were up. Quietly they sneaked outside. Quickly Delaney explained his plan.

"Just be careful, Tex," the big Irishman warned. "Don't get caught now. We're stickin' together from here out. If there's trouble in Mustang Valley, that's where I want to be."

CHAPTER XVIII

Retribution Rides

POOLING their money, Delaney took it and struck out alone for Rockport. He was gone the better part of the day. When he returned he was riding one horse and leading two others. He had what few supplies and food they would need, boots for himself and Stoker, and boy's overalls and range garb for Jean.

Deep-seated worry and tragic hopelessness were in Jean's eyes, despite her smile. All her life she had been carefully guarded from the raw brutality of the Frontier, but now that it had been forced upon her she met it bravely. Her dark hair was combed and braided, framing her face.

At sight of her Delaney's pulse quickened. A warming glow touched him, but the grimness of him did not relax. With the clothes he had brought her, she darted into the bedroom. In just a few moments she returned, face flushing as all eyes raked her lithe, boyish figure. She looked even smaller in overalls, jacket and rough boots, but the tilt of her head and each movement breathed of strength.

"I'm ready, Tex," she murmured.

"It'll be a hard trip, Jean. Still want to go?"

"Yes, Tex," was all she said.

They left as night shadows began creeping over the bay country, thanking the farmer and his wife for all they had done. Delaney set the pace, circling Rockport, and striking the Texas trail miles inland.

The drizzle stopped completely and the heavens cleared. By midnight the stars glimmered overhead and the groundfogs began lifting. With the clamor of frogs and crickets ringing in their ears, they went on, mile after mile. Not once did Delaney call a halt, nor did he speak a word. In escaping from the doomed ship he had managed to save his six-shooter. In Rockport he had bought new cartridges, which were stuffed into the belt about his waist.

Jean had ridden saddle horses in the bridle parks in New Orleans. As did all ladies of breeding, she had ridden side-saddle. It would have been unthinkable to have done otherwise. In long flowing skirts she had taken brisk canters, sided by an instructor who was hired by her father. Now those days seemed vague, remote. She kept telling herself that the past few days were a nightmare from which she would soon awaken.

She clung to the kak horn much of the time. Every muscle in her body ached. Bits of what Delaney had told her kept spinning through her mind. At times she closed her eyes and saw the image of her mother, prim and lovely, as she had been before death claimed her. She remembered Father Poiret, who had so often visited in the Lamont home, kindly, jovial and understanding.

That night in the church, when Delaney had left her, Jean had remained until Father Poiret returned. She readily confessed to him of her strange feeling toward the bearded young Texan with the bitter eyes. She admitted kissing him, even though she was betrothed to another man. She had called him Senor Texas.

And Father Pioret had smiled with understanding. He had never thought of Jean falling in love with anyone until then. It pleased him, for there had been something about the tall Texan's level way of talking that appealed to him.

"Love sometimes comes quickly, Jean," he had told her.

"Love?"

"You love him, my child," he replied simply.

She didn't know. All she knew was that she had never forgotten the way he looked at her, and the feel of his protective strength and the warmth of his lips. She never told her father exactly what had happened that night, for he would not have understood. Then, too, she thought that she would forget Senor Texas as time went on. But she never had. And in that great lonely house that was her home in New Orleans, while her father lay sick, Jean had prayed that sometime, sometime she would again see her Senor Texas.

Near dawn, Delaney called a halt. Back in a gully he started a fire and cooked a quick meal. So still and tired she could hardly move, Jean denied herself of rest,

doing all she could to help. Afterwards, when she rolled up in her blanket and slept, Delaney and Stoker talked for hours.

That afternoon they went on. In Delaney was the fierce urge to hurry. He knew that in Mustang Valley lay all the answers to his puzzling questions. And through the bitterness and unrest of his soul came hope that he could clear his name and find vengeance. Then, and only then, could he hope for the peace and security that he longed for.

SINCE that night months ago, when Frank Delaney had been killed, young Delaney had carried with him the brass cartridge that had brought death to his father. It had been a constant reminder of his vow to find the murderer.

There was another day of riding, barely pausing to eat and drink. Then another, with Delaney constantly on the alert. The third night he and Jean were preparing a scant meal while Stoker was scouting for more wood. They stooped for the frying pan together and almost collided. When they straightened their eyes met and held. And in the warmth of her gaze Delaney read all the unvoiced promise of loyalty and love that one woman has to bestow upon a man.

He knew then, as never before, that he wanted Jean Lamont for his own—to protect and cherish all through life. He saw in her all the courage and wholesome goodness that is a woman's heritage. Yet he stiffened, looking away. For between them fell the shadow of her father, of Jacques Chaffee, and the fact that the law wanted Delaney. Until that shadow was removed it was foolish for either of them to hope.

There were tears in Jean's eyes when Delaney turned to other chores without a word. Then Stoker came striding into camp. They ate little and spoke less. Afterward they rolled up in their blankets. And even though she was dead-tired, Jean lay awake a long time, staring up through the trees at the stars, praying.

Before dawn Delaney was up, cooking a meal. He set a terrific pace that day, taking a short-cut over the hills where wild game was in abundance. Night had fallen when they reached the hilltop that overlooked Mustang Valley. It lay before them, an endless lake of shadows and gloom, strangely hushed, as if gripped in some evil spell.

"The Circle L first?" Stoker asked significantly.

"Yes," Delaney said softly.

He led the way down the slope, caution tempering his impatience. Jean's face was drawn and white, her eyes dark pools as she rode behind them. Lights of the Circle L ranchhouse came into view. Delaney slowed the pace, guiding his horse through the high brush carefully. Near one of the outlying corrals he stopped and slid to the ground.

"You stay here, Jean," he said guardedly.

She dismounted and came toward him.

"No, Tex. I'm going with you and Stoker. Whatever happens I want to be with you."

Delaney knew that nothing he could say would make this strong-willed girl change her mind. Stoker grinned broadly.

"Lead on, Tex. I ain't got a gun, but I can blame shore use me fists."

Drawing his six-shooter, Delaney moved warily around the corral, sticking to the shadows. Behind him came Stoker and Jean. The front windows of the house glowed with light. There came the faint murmur of man-talk. The long, low-roofed bunkhouse was dark. But as they dodged into the shadows of the house Delaney saw several saddled horses in the front yard.

Voices came to them. One voice rose above the others, hinting of an accent and tremulous with fury.

"*Mon Dieu!* What a fool I was to trust you, Chaffee!"

Jean was clutching Delaney's arm, whispering:

"That's Dad!"

"That's what I figgered, Stoker!" Delaney gritted. "Come on."

Just then the front door of the house burst open and men came charging out on the gallery.

* * *

The night the *Lucy May* docked in Rockport, three men disembarked along with several other passengers. In the busy turmoil along the water-front those three men picked their way to the center of town without stopping. All of them carried carpet-bags, and one of the men had a small legal-looking valise tucked under his arm.

At a livery stable a stage-coach was rented, a team and driver hired. The man with the small valise busied himself in stores along the main thoroughfare for an hour or more, buying supplies and attending to the details that go with an arduous trip.

Lanterns were attached to the coach, front and rear. Sometimes around midnight a bundled, profane driver trundled his coach out on the Texas trail. The three men were inside, their luggage on the rack above.

"It will probably be a strenuous five-day trip, Mr. Lamont," the man with the valise said. "Do you suppose you can stand it?"

THE tall, thin-faced man called Lamont leaned back against the cushioned seat. He wore the flat-crowned hat, the polished boots and tailored broadcloth of a man of breeding and wealth. Beneath shaggy gray

brows were penetrating dark eyes, hooded with shadows. The pallor of his cheeks told of a lingering illness. Pride and determination showed in every line of this aging Frenchman's countenance. He was a person who was rabid in his loves and hates.

"I am all right, *M'sieu* Holt," he said wearily.

Casper Holt was a secretary, with a knowledge of law. He was a little rabbit of a man with pinch-nose glasses that made his eyes look twice their size. His bony features were the color of dough as he kept fingering the valise across his lap. All his fifty-seven years he had looked to others for protection, abhorring violence.

Across from him sat the third man, a derby hat cocked on one side of his round head. His black coat was pulled back, revealing a shiny badge. He was a florid-faced man with marble-like eyes and a frayed, unlit cigar in his mouth. As the stage rolled on through the drizzling night he occasionally leaned forward to spit out of the window.

"Ain't nothin' either of you got anything to worry about with me along," he said confidently.

"Hope not, Fallon," said Casper Holt.

"You've seen me in action, ain't you, Holt?"

"Sure I have."

"Then quit worryin'."

"I'm just worrying about Mr. Lamont. I've got him to think about, you know."

"He's all right. He's asleep."

They went the night through without mishap. Along the brush-hemmed, rutted trail they halted for breakfast, the three men and the driver. Noon came and passed, but they made no stop again until evening. Again they ate, rested a few hours and then resumed their journey.

On and on they went, day after day, deeper into the tumbled, lawless land, forging swollen streams and over slippery trails where their lurching stage swayed close to the edge of cliffs. The driver cursed the jaded horses. They saw no sign of human life; only deer, wild mustang and maverick cattle that went crashing off through the brush.

The hardships and continual jolting put lines of fatigue in the men's faces. Fear grew in Casper Holt's eyes. His face and hands appeared to grow thinner.

"How much farther is it, Mr. Lamont?" he asked time and again.

"It can't be far now."

"Big state, this here Texas," said Fallon.

That very night they topped a hump in the trail and the black, broad expanse of Mustang Valley lay beneath them. In the far distance they spotted the lights of Mosquero. The driver lashed his team on. The brush rose high on both sides of the trail.

As they made an abrupt turn around the toe of a hill the driver swore, dropped the lines and clawed frantically for his rifle as riders suddenly blocked the trail. A gun in the hands of one of them spurted flame.

Rifle half-raised, the driver stiffened, a bullet through his heart. He fell from his perch, striking the near wheel, then falling soddenly to the ground. Then in a flash the riders were dismounted, yanking open the stage-coach doors.

Casper Holt screamed as rough hands jerked him outside. A gun prodded into his side.

"Shut up, runt!" a snarling voice said. "Come on, you two other jiggers! Pile out with hands high."

CHAPTER XIX

Six-Gun Show-Down

HOLT was pushed out first, both arms in the air, his face ashen. After him came Fallon and the man called Lamont, eyes feverish with indignation and outrage.

"If this is a hold-up—"

"This ain't no hold-up, mister. The boss wants to see yuh, and took this way of doin' it."

"Who is this boss you refer to?"

"Pierre Lamont."

"Why, *I'm* Pierre Lamont!" the tall, sallow faced man cried, aghast.

Chaffee grinned wolfishly. "That's what you think, mister."

"Who are you?"

"Me? I'm Jacques Chaffee."

"*Par tous les diables!*" Lamont raged. "You are crazy, man! This is an outrage! I demand that you let us go on! *Mon Dieu!*"

"Cut out the parley-vous talk!" Chaffee rapped. "*Bueno*, boys, ham-string 'em, take any guns they might have and load 'em back in the coach. Silver, tie yore hoss on behind and drive. Toss the dead driver in the back with 'em."

Lamont stood the torture of being tied better than his two terror-stricken companions. White-faced and shaken, he was shoved back into the coach. Moaning, Casper Holt fell to the floor beside the body of the dead driver. Fallon, his derby hat awry, stripped of his pistol, slumped on the seat, terrified beyond words.

Silver climbed up to the coach seat. He left

the road, heading across the brush-dotted valley at a tangent. A half-dozen hard-faced, double-gunned Circle L men rode ahead and behind him. One of the riders turned to Chaffee, eyed him narrowly and said:

"Who is that tall, sick lookin' jigger, Chaffee?"

"Loco. Thinks he's Pierre Lamont."

When they drew up in the Circle L ranchyard, Chaffee unloaded the prisoners and ordered Silver to drive the coach on into the barn.

Hands tied behind their backs, the three men were escorted into the house. Chaffee ordered the riders to wait in the front room. Quickly he prodded the prisoners down a long gloomy corridor. A door stood ajar, allowing a shaft of lamplight to spear out into the hallway.

Lamont was first to enter this back room. He scanned the heavy hand-carved table and chairs and the ornate furishings. Across the room a big man stood in front of a fireplace. As Lamont's eyes came to rest on the man, he stopped. Fear was no part of him. Only loathing and rage burned in his eyes and deepened the lines of suffering in his pallid face.

"*M'sieu* Chaffee!" he exclaimed huskily. "What in heaven's name is the meaning of this? Speak up, man!"

The big man across the room was smiling, but his dark eyes were bright with the passions and lust of a killer. About him was all the supreme confidence of a gambler who scorns anything but big stakes. His black mustache was carefully trimmed and his clothes were immaculate. All pretense of decency had dropped from the man. His grinning face was a mask of evil—the face of a man driven by mad greed, gloating in power, and deadly as a coiled rattler.

"In this country, my friend," he said softly, "*I* am known as Pierre Lamont. That is the way it will continue. I'm glad you got my message to come here. We were expecting you. That's why I had the men meet you. This goggle-eyed little man I take to be your secretary. And I presume this fat-faced man in the derby is a lawman of sorts."

"Chaffee!" Lamont cried hoarsely. "You imposter! You—"

"Where is your charming daughter?"

"In New Orleans, thank heaven!"

"She'll be shocked when she learns that your coach was raided by renegades, and that you were killed. I regret that you won't be at the wedding."

Trembling as the shocking truth came clear, Lamont lunged forward, blind to his own helplessness. The big man's fist drove him back against the wall, where he stood with blood trickling down from the corners of his lips, staring with the dazed look of a man who has met a nightmare in the flesh.

"You know what you're to do, Chaffee?" the big man rasped to the man who was known in the Valley as Jacques Chaffee.

"Shore."

"Did the men wonder about the deal tonight?"

"I told 'em this gent was loco, that's all."

"Good! Then do as I told you. I'll leave Silver behind to help you. After tonight there will be no more raids. This one will be the last."

HE WAS striding past the three prisoners toward the hallway door when Pierre Lamont's voice rose with tremulous fury.

"*Mon Dieu!* What a fool I was to trust you, Chaffee!"

The big man was already out in the corridor, tugging a big hat low over his eyes and pulling on a slicker. The waiting Circle L gunhands in the front room tramped after him, out the front door. In the yard they flung astride, jabbed spurs and roared away.

Leaving the barn, Silver hurried into the house through the kitchen door. When he entered the back room where the prisoners were awaiting their doom, the man called Chaffee turned and said:

"Take 'em to the barn, Silver."

"That's murder, Chaffee," the stringy gunman protested.

"That's what yuh're paid for."

"Shore—shore."

"And Lamont is good to yuh, ain't he?"

"Shore."

Silver's restless eyes looked at the three terrified men, and he licked his dry lips. Years ago he had tried to go straight, but the greed to buy fine horses had guided him to evil. He had assumed a perpetual sneer that he thought gunmen were supposed to have, and in his slow-working mind were memories of smoking guns and faces contorted with fear and death. He might not have ben bad if things had been different.

"Come on," he said to the prisoners.

The three men walked out of the room and Silver followed them, a big six-shooter gripped in his bony fist. He guided them out to the kitchen where he paused to light a lantern. Then he made them go outside, across the yard and to the barn. They uttered no protest, for they walked as if dazed.

Inside the barn, near the stage-coach, Silver stopped them. Only then did Casper Holt find his voice. He knew he was going to die, and the horror of it filled his bulging eyes.

"Don't!" he screamed pitifully.

He slumped to the floor in a dead faint. Fallon stood trembling, his round head bare and his eyes wild. Lamont stood rigid and scornful, face working, as if struggling vainly against the mental poison of his venom. He

crossed himself as Silver's gun began leveling.

"Drop that gun, Silver," a low voice said from the doorway behind Silver. "I don't want to kill yuh. We're goin' to need yuh to testify!"

Silver turned, the six-shooter dropping from his fingers to the floor. He saw the three figures in the doorway, limned against the black night outside.

"Delaney!" he said, stupefied.

"Cut 'em lose, Stoker!" Delaney gritted. "Then come on to the house. We've got to hurry!"

Delaney whirled, raced back toward the house, his brain afire with what he had overheard. With jarring clarity all the sordid mystery that surrounded his life came clear. Killing rage, unlike anything he had ever known, stormed through him. Yet he was cool when he reached the kitchen door.

He stepped inside, gun palmed and tense. The door to the ranchhouse office stood open before him. And from that room came the masquerading Chaffee's snarled query:

"That you, Silver? What's the matter? I didn't hear no gunshots."

Then Delaney was in the portal, striding slowly forward. To him only one thing existed in the room—Chaffee who stood facing him, drink in hand. The Circle L foreman's glass shattered as it dropped to the floor. Black panic, then terror, struck his face. His dead and colorless eyes jerked wide.

"Delaney!" he said throatily. "Yuh're dead!"

Delaney's lips didn't move. "Not dead, Chaffee. Just back from the grave to square things!"

Stumbling backward, Chaffee stabbed frenziedly for his gun, fired and missed as Delaney's gun flamed. The bullet caught the Circle L man in the right arm, ripping the gun from his grasp. Then with all his savagery unleased, Delaney went after him, smashing him to the floor under the very weight of his drive. His fingers found Chaffee's thick throat, stifling his curses and screams.

Giving vent to his fury, Delaney jerked Chaffee back to his feet and battered him down again. The strength and fight was out of Chaffee. His breath came in great gulps. Then steely fingers found his windpipe and his contorted face darkened.

NEITHER man was conscious of the other people in the room behind them. There was Jean in her father's arms; Fallon and Casper Holt, with only their eyes alive in their dead-white faces. And Stoker, gripping a six-shooter and yelling:

"Choke him, Tex, boy! Choke the blasted truth out of him!"

Only then did Delaney become aware of their presence. Through a red haze he saw Chaffee's ugly face. His grip relaxed, and Chaffee lay limp, gasping for breath, his courage gone. Nothing is so horrible as the pleas of a man who knows he's done and is afraid.

"Don't kill me, Delaney! Don't kill me!"

"Talk fast then, Chaffee! It's yore only chance!"

"Wait! Give me a chance to get my breath."

"Yore name's not Chaffee, is it?"

"No, Delaney. My real name's Durk Bullard."

"And the real Chaffee?"

"Is the one that framed all this, Delaney. Don't kill me for what he done. It was his idee that I take his name and he take the name of Lamont. I was afeerd all along he'd never get by with it, even if he is smart." The man whose name was Durk Bullard was babbling, his eyes rolling whitely.

"Where did he and the men go?"

"To the Hoskins ranch."

Delaney leaped to his feet, scooping up his own gun, kicking the one that had belonged to Bullard toward the stunned group of onlookers.

"Guard him, Lamont!" he panted. "And wait here!"

"Tex!" Jean screamed.

She and Stoker raced after Delaney as he sprinted down the corridor into the front room and then outside. He was almost to the corral where they had left their horses before he realized they were following him.

"Jean!" he snapped huskily. "Go back!"

"No, Tex. Remember what I told you? I'm going along!"

There was no turning her back. Nor was there time for words. As they flung astride they heard the crackle of distant gunfire that wrenched a groan from Delaney. He sent his horse bolting off into the brush, with Jean and Stoker riding at his heels. Jean, riding with all the courage and grace of a girl who is born to the saddle, her lot cast with the fighting Texan ahead, whom she loved. And Stoker, clutching the kak horn, bouncing and swaying, cursing and yelling and thrilling to the lust of battle.

But Delaney never looked back. In that mad ride thorny brush tore at his legs. The roar of the wind and thunder of hoof-beats filled his ears. His eyes kept stabbing the starlit gloom ahead. Over a ridge he swooped, riding the stirrups. Then he heard again the echo of gunfire, glimpsed the dim outline of Bowie's ranchhouse and outbuildings.

Rifle flame spurted from the windows, from the barn. And Chaffee's killers, caught in that holocaust of lead, were fleeing. It

didn't make sense to Delaney. Somewhere along the line the real Chaffee's murderous plans had gone wrong. Caught in the treacherous web of his own spinning, his men were being slaughtered. Only a few would escape in that withering fire.

"Stoker, you and Jean stay back!" Delaney yelled.

Shadows leaped out of the night in front of them. Two Circle L gunmen, bent low and spurring out of gun range, suddenly burst upon them. Panic spoiled their aim, for they fired first and missed. Delaney triggered. His gun bucked and one of the riders fell from his running horse. Then, even as Stoker yelled, Delaney recognized the other man.

It was the real Jacques Chaffee, who had posed as Pierre Lamont, whose audacity and cunning had plunged the Valley into ruin!

CHAPTER XX

Land of Promise

GRIMLY driven by one last desire to finish the chore to which he had dedicated his life, Delaney whirled to give chase.

Just when Chaffee's well-planned success seemed certain, it had crashed to earth about him. From that death-trap at Hoskins' ranch he struck out for the Border.

Occasionally in that wild ride, Delaney lost sight of Chaffee. But each time he picked up the fleeing man's trail as they thundered up hill and down, through dense thickets and around bog holes. More than once, as the distance between them lessened, Delaney could have shot Chaffee. But he held his hand. A quick death by a bullet was too good for him.

"Chaffee!" Delaney yelled at the top of his lungs.

The big range hog flung one glance back. His hat was gone. Starlight suddenly gleamed from the barrel of his gun. Frantically he triggered it, only to hear it click on empty shells. Cursing, he threw it away. His horse was tiring, faltering. Where the brush broke into a clearing, the animal went down, catapulting the big rider to the ground.

Delaney leaped from saddle, tossing his six-shooter aside. Chaffee rose to meet him like a great wounded grizzly, his clothes and face torn and scratched from thorns. There was no part of Chaffee a coward. He bulked large, lips pulled back in a wolfish snarl, eyes glowing with unutterable hate.

"They told me you were dead, Delaney," he grated. "And like a fool I believed them. Things would have been different if I hadn't had to trust to stupid fools."

"Yore game is done, Chaffee," Delaney said coolly.

They were alone. Neither man was armed. As they faced one another they knew that death waited for one of them. With a rush they came together, both powerful as raging bulls, both impelled by the same lust to smash and kill. There was no science now; no duck and feint and spar.

Delaney's rock-hard fists worked like pistons. He barely felt the crushing drive of Chaffee's rights and lefts. In close grips they went down, rolled and kicked and gouged. Delaney was up first, chest heaving, sledging Chaffee back on his heels. His lungs felt as if they were bursting. He tasted the salty warm blood in his mouth.

Chaffee, bloody and beaten, went down again. Before he could rise Delaney was on him, his fingers locked in a vice-like grip on the Circle L man's throat. He didn't feel Chaffee's weakening blows in his face. Through a hazy blur he saw Chaffee's hate-filled eyes flutter as death closed in, and with the same cold mercilessness he would have shown in stamping out the like of a snake, Delaney hung on.

Minutes later, Delaney rose to his feet, ripping Chaffee's cartridge belt from about the big man. With slow-working, fumbling fingers he punched out one of the few remaining cartridges from its loop. It was a .45 bullet—a duplicate to the one which had killed Frank Delaney.

"The job's done, Dad," Delaney murmured.

He went back to his horse, mounted and started back. He didn't hurry. A heavy load seemed lifted from his shoulders. But for himself peace seemed like a phantom thing that could never be. A great loneliness settled over him.

When he looked up he saw the lights of Bowie Hoskins' ranch. Men with lanterns were moving about in the yard. Riders were coming and going. As he pulled into the yard someone yelled his name. Then Bowie, Captain McNelly and several other ranchers came running to meet him.

"Chaffee, the man who called himself Lamont, is dead," Delaney told him.

"Yuh got him?" McNelly asked grimly.

Delaney swung down. "As he was headin' for the Border."

He looked over the heads of the excited men facing him. Nowhere could he spot Jean, or Stoker. Except for McNelly the men about him were all talking at once. There was Mossy Cooper, Long John Pike and Lane

Newberry; Sam Whitehead, Bottles Lawrence, Parson Cripps and others. Men whose sons and kin had died, but who now knew the truth.

"Lamont's daughter and the big Irishman are lookin' all over for yuh, Tex," Bowie blatted. "And listen—"

"I'd better explain, Hoskins," McNelly said, smiling.

"The real Lamont," Delaney told them, "is at the Circle L, standin' guard over the man we knew as Chaffee."

"Chaffee?" Bowie echoed, perplexed. "Heck, Tex, I thought yuh said yuh just finished with Chaffee."

DELANEY made no effort to enlighten the little oldster just then. At his suggestion, he, McNelly and several of the other men mounted and rode to the Circle L. There they found Pierre Lamont and Durk Bullard, whose confession cleared up everything.

Later that night, Captain McNelly said:

"Delaney, Texas needs more men like you. It's a great State with a great future. Chaffee's brand of lawlessness is gone forever. A great injustice was done yuh by bein' imprisoned long after the War closed. No one is to blame but Captain Strang, who made a personal issue out of yore capture. You and Chili Cortina should have been released when peace was declared, as were other prisoners.

"We know now that the real Chaffee murdered yore father to gain his land and cattle. We know now that he personally led the raids on the trail and on the ranches to terrorize folks into movin' on. And with all his cunnin' he made it appear as if Juan Cortina and his Mexicans were doin' it. In checkin' with Mexican officials I find yuh were right. Juan Cortina is in prison in Mexico City—and has been for many months. Chaffee's whole rotten scheme was to own and control all of Mustang Valley, and if possible, gain all of Pierre Lamon't holdin's. He had crooked helpers in every branch of Lamont's service—boatmen, clerks and teamsters. They'll be rounded up pronto.

"The clerk in Rockport lied himself into prison when he testified that he paid you the money for the wagon-train of hides. That money was paid to Chaffee himself. He and some of his men had planned to waylay the train, but Durk Bullard did it his way, hopin' to gain Chaffee's favor. Chaffee killed Captain Strang—and just happened to do it the night yuh escaped with the gun Chili Cortina slipped into the guard-house window. Strang had ideas of ranchin' in the valley himself, and Chaffee wanted him out of the way.

"More than that, Chaffee bushwhacked yuh the night of the pool meetin'. Both he and Durk Bullard were afraid of yuh—afraid yuh'd get an inkling of their plans. Beneath his smooth talk and polish, Jacques Chaffee was as villianous and as treacherous a criminal as I've ever encountered. Now that the job is done I'd like to shake yore hand, Delaney, and wish yuh well."

His heart too full for words, Delaney gripped the lawman's hand, murmuring the name "Captain McNelly"—a name that will live forever in Texas history. Off to one side stood Tad Hoskins, grinning happily and sniffing to keep from crying. Earlier, Delaney had praised Tad for all he had done in front of everyone. It was one of the biggest moments of the boy's life.

"Delaney and me is pards," Tad whispered to Bottles.

"The devil!" said Bottles.

The pool men found where Chaffee had hidden his money in a wall safe. It was money that would be evenly divided among them, affording them a fresh start. Spring rains and the warm sun had made the pastures green. There were longhorns and wild mustangs to be roped and branded. Someone said a trail to Abilene, Kansas, soon would be opening. There would be no more skinning of cattle for their hides alone. Truly enough the hides and tallow factories along the Gulf Coast would rot in their own stench.

There was much that Delaney did not understand, but Bowie did his best to enlighten him.

"Why was we ready for Chaffee's raid, Tex? We just put two and two together, son. Captain McNelly figgered that would be Chaffee's next move. Each night for a week we been braced for it. After the night you and Tad broke away from McNelly and his men they've watched Chaffee like a hawk. What yuh told them about Chaffee opened their eyes, I guess."

"Yuh heard from Starr?"

"She's in St. Louis, Tex," Bowie said slowly, "and happy, accordin' to the letter I got. I guess that's all that counts."

"That means everything," Delaney told him.

HE WALKED outside where the late night air was clean and fragrant and warm with the breath of an early summer. For the first time since he could remember he knew peace. This valley was his home, and it was a good land. These ranchers who had toughed it out were his friends and neighbors. Then there was Chili. There would be times when he and his bright-eyed wife would ride over for visits. Only one thing was missing.

And she was suddenly coming out of the shadows of the trees toward him. Starlight

glinted in her dark hair and brightened her eyes. Never before had she looked so lovely, so desirable. All the joy and promise a woman has to offer were in her eyes for Delaney to see. She smiled softly. "Dad plans to settle here on the ranch, Tex. I'm just wondering if I'll like it here."

"Yuh're bound to, Jean. Dad used to call it God's country, and I guess it still is. Only—"

"Only what, Tex?"

"I love yuh, Jean," he said awkwardly. "I want yuh to marry me."

She laughed shakily while tears brimmed in her eyes.

"I thought you'd never ask me, Tex," she whispered. "I know I'll like it here now."

From the gallery, Tad, Stoker, Parson Cripps and Bottles Lawrence saw their shadows merge. Stoker stopped telling them that he reckoned he'd take up ranching and work for Delaney.

"Looks like a job fer the Parson, don't it, Bottles?" he asked, grinning.

"Shore does, Stoker. Only call me Ranger. That's my name now—Ranger Lawrence."

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A Rawhide Story

A boot toe crashed into Keston's wrist

BANK ON BOOT HILL

By TOM PARSONS

Paul Pace, new cashier in Rawhide, seems a timid soul —but proves otherwise when a swindler gets proddy!

LEM ADAMS, the big, white-haired storekeeper of Rawhide, always believed that the world balanced itself, one way or the other.

"Yuh get something good, something bad comes along," he had often said. "Make a move to build, and yuh can bet yore last blue chip there's some gent ready to tear down."

Events in Rawhide in the past had more or less strengthened Lem's belief, and he was sure this new move on the part of Jed Krannert, Doc Renford and himself would have its dark side. He said as much when Jed Krannert leaned back in his chair and lit a strong black cigar. The stocky rancher sighed in satisfied relief.

"Well, I reckon she's done, gents. Lem, you swing Colonel Short into this with his *dinero*, and we'll have us a bank."

"With what *dinero* we've put up, the Colonel will swing in," Lem said with certainty. Then his forehead wrinkled in a deep frown. "But somewhere along the line we'll hit trouble."

"Might not," young Doc Renford objected.

"You watch." Lem shook his white head. "Me, I hope for the best, but I ain't surprised none if it don't come along."

Krannert chuckled and arose.

Rawhide sat at the foot of the War Bonnet Range where gold mines were beginning to produce a small but steady stream of nuggets. Out on the plains were several large ranches, Krannert's among them, which handled considerable money over the course of a year.

Rawhide itself had grown, and the nearest bank was in Pinto, the county seat, close to seventy miles away.

"Roundup will be here by the time the bank's ready," Krannert said comfortably. "It'll shore be a blessin' not to worry about the *dinero* until she's in Pinto. Good night, gents. Lem, yuh're gloomy enough to be an undertaker. Can't nothin' go wrong."

Jed Krannert and Doc Renford seemed to have called the turn. The next day Lem drove with "Peg" Strickland to Pinto, and Colonel Short was instantly enthusiastic. He listened as Lem sketched the plans for the bank and the terms on which the four men would organize it. He beamed when Lem stated the Colonel was to be president.

"Yuh got a heap more experience than anybody in Rawhide," Lem said. "Yuh run her, and yuh can hire the cashier and clerks. There won't be no questions from us. We know yore reputation. Just get the bank."

COLONEL SHORT fitted his name, for he was a small, rotund man with a nervous energy that thrived on problems. Before Lem left Pinto, the Colonel had contributed his share of money for the stock, filed the papers for the corporation, and started his lawyer on the legal request to the Territorial Government to start the bank.

"I got just the man in mind for cashier," the Colonel told Lem. "If I can get Paul Pace down from Abilene, he's our man."

"Abilene's a long way," Lem suggested, "but yuh got a free hand, Colonel. Get yore man and come to Rawhide. We'll shore be eager for yuh."

Time passed, but the Colonel was not idle. He made several trips to Rawhide, met the business men of the town, and the ranchers and miners. His enthusiasm for the bank mounted. He picked a site next to the stage station where the bank building would be constructed. The bank was duly incorporated and approved.

There wasn't a sign of trouble and Lem Adams quietly took Jed Krannert's roweling on the score.

"It ain't done yet," Lem answered Jed, "and yuh'll find trouble poppin' before long."

For all the speed with which the peppery little Colonel worked, law and Government could not be hurried. It was nearly roundup time before the last of the papers were approved. Krannert wanted the bank to start business right away, so Will Dean offered to rent an unused portion of the stage station as a temporary office. Contracts were already let for the bank building to be erected next door. Rawhide had its bank.

Colonel Short remained temporarily in Pinto but his cashier, Paul Pace, took up residence at Mrs. Garver's rooming house. He was a tall, quiet man, easy-spoken, unhurried. The gray eyes in his skull-like face mirrored no excitement when the bank's first customer stepped up to the window in the flimsy wooden partition.

"I got two hundred dollars yuh can keep for me," the bearded giant said. "The handle's Art Keston."

Pace reached for the money and nimble, swift fingers counted the crumpled bills.

"Resident of Rawhide?" he asked.

Keston spat on the floor in disgust. His hat was shoved back on his sun-reddened low forehead. Black eyes looked pinched together on either side of a hawklike nose. Beneath the dark beard his lips showed thick and red. He had brawny broad shoulders, and a gun-belt circled his thick waist. Powerful legs ended in dusty, low boots. His voice held an unpleasant rasp.

"Shucks, no! Rawhide is the poorest excuse I ever seen for a town. I aim to buy me some cattle around here."

Pace looked up. His gray eyes flicked sharply over the rough face beyond the wooden grille.

"Two hundred won't buy many cows, friend."

"More comin'," Keston growled, and glared angrily at the cashier. "Reckon I know my business, mister, and how to handle it."

"Sorry," Pace said quietly.

He swept the bills into the cash drawer and made out a deposit book. Keston's black eyes peered through the grille, taking in the thick, small safe, the new desk, the flimsy partition.

"Ain't much of a bank to my way of thinkin'," he commented roughly. He hitched up his gun-belt. "A button could knock this place off."

Pace handed the deposit book through the grille. He glanced around the narrow quarters and his wide, thin lips broke in a smile.

"Maybe, but I'm not worried. The Rawhide buttons don't play that sort of games."

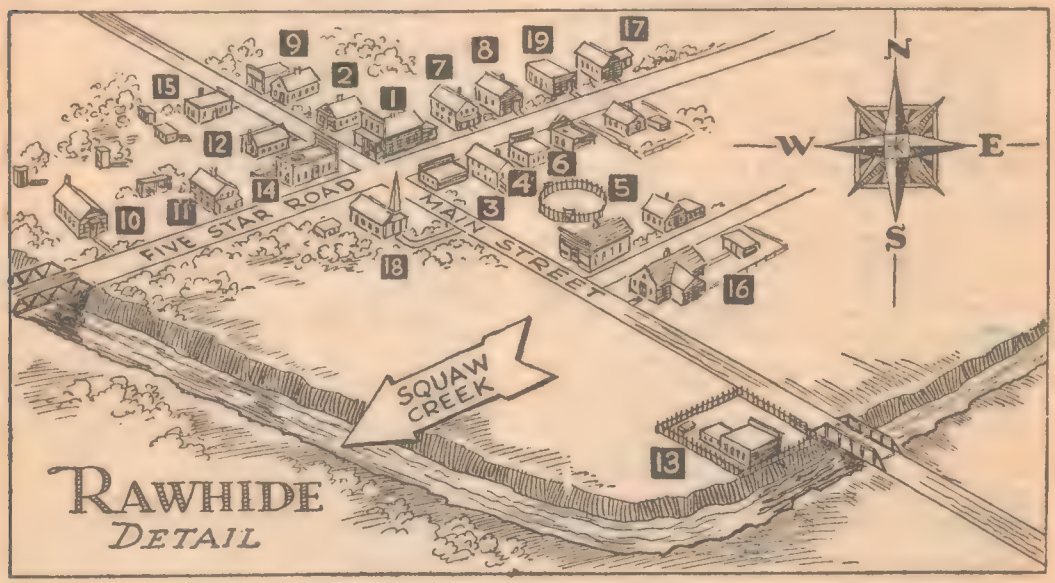
Keston snorted and turned away. He

moved slowly toward the door and Paul Pace watched him through the grille. Keston's black eyes roamed everywhere.

He stopped by the door and his stubby fingers rolled a cigarette while he listened to a man buy a coach ticket to Pinto. At last he lit the cigarette and left.

Pace remained leaning against the counter. At last he sighed softly and a cold glint came into his gray eyes. It was gone in a moment and once more his thin, bony face was mild and peaceful.

Rawhide became well aware of Art Keston during the next few weeks. The ranches were busy with roundups, and a cattle-buyer should have been constantly riding the range



from one spread to the other. Keston preferred to remain at the New Deck.

He was a heavy drinker, but it didn't seem to effect him other than to fray his temper and make his black eyes bloodshot and mean. He sat in on several of the poker games and soon tried to push the betting into high figures. Square-jawed Dent Sturgis stopped that in a hurry.

"We play for fun here, *amigo.*" Dent clipped off his words and stepped up to the table. He eyed the big stack of blue chips that Keston had pushed out to bet. "Pull that stake back."

"I figgered on a man's game," Keston growled. "I buck the tiger and twist his tail when I sit in a game." He glared around the table. The players said nothing and Sturgis still leaned over the green top.

"Then yuh'll have to play somewheres else," Sturgis answered and straightened. "Every game here is friendly. The stakes is low and there's no trouble. No man has gone out of here a heavy loser and he won't. I made that promise and I'm keepin' it."

KESTON'S brow creased in a deep, ugly frown. Once more his mean eyes cut around the table as though looking for support. There was none. No one had made a move to match his bet. Abruptly Keston slammed down his cards and pulled back the stack of chips.

"I'm checkin' out. I might as well go to Sunday school, I reckon."

"Yuh'd learn a heap," Sturgis snapped, and Keston's head jerked up.

For a long moment the two men glared at one another. Keston's hand made an involuntary move toward his holstered gun, but he checked himself. Tension fairly crackled around the table. Then Keston seemed to realize that the others would probably side Dent Sturgis, and caution came to his rescue. He finished stacking the chips, and Sturgis coldly paid off the winning.

Paul Pace came through the batwings and stood quietly at the bar. Away from the grilled window, he looked tall and gaunt, somewhat loose-jointed. His face was pale under the yellow glow of the lamps. He mildly watched Sturgis pay off Keston, then move back of the bar to serve Pace himself. Paul ordered his usual wine and took a small sip of it.

Keston moved uncertainly around the room while the poker game quietly continued without him. Then he turned to the bar, ordered a whisky. He glanced at Pace, and his heavy brows rose when he saw the wine.

"Only a yellow-livered tenderfoot would drink that stuff!" he stated flatly.

Silence instantly fell on the room. The players at the table looked up, narrow-eyed. Dent Sturgis flushed and his big fist clenched. Pace made a quiet sign that checked the saloon owner.

"That may be," Pace acknowledged, his voice soft and even. "But it's as strong as I go."

He turned and walked away. Keston snorted and downed his drink of fiery liquor. Dent swished a bar cloth around with more energy than was needed.

"Some day, my friend," he said pointedly, "yuh'll meet a gent who won't like nothin' about yuh. He'll teach yuh some manners."

"You, mebbe?" Keston demanded.

"Mebbe."

The bar cloth stopped and Sturgis waited, eyes level. Keston shrugged and laughed.

"I've managed to take care of myself." His glance circled the room and rested on Paul Pace, seated by himself at a distant table. Keston's voice rose. "But with penny-ante tinhorns and weak-kneed wine drinkers I ain't worried."

He turned and strode out. Dent Sturgis slammed his cloth under the bar and swore under his breath. Paul Pace looked up and smiled gently.

"Don't let him worry you, Dent. There's not many of his kind."

"Just one too many in Rawhide," Sturgis growled, and came over to the table. "Yuh got my permission to knock his ugly block off next time he starts rowelin' yuh in here."

"Thanks," Paul answered. "But I avoid fights. Words are gone with the wind anyhow."

Sturgis started to nod, then looked sharply at the cashier. Paul's soft gray eyes watched the poker players and he took another sip of his wine. Sturgis felt a little nag of doubt. Folks all liked Paul Pace, but he was the most-peaceful natured gent ever to come to Rawhide.

Dent's attention turned to the wine. Only Pace drank it in the whole Rawhide district and Dent stocked a few bottles just for the cashier. It was sort of weak compared with some of the hot, hard-hitting stuff the cowboys and miners drank. Dent dismissed his doubts. Paul was all right, just peaceful.

But in the next few days, Dent began to believe more and more that Paul Pace was too peaceful. Art Keston took an evil delight in hunting out the mild cashier and insulting him in a loud and rasping voice. It had not yet come to an open challenge but it would. Dent wondered whether Pace would accept the challenge. It was probably uncertainty and worry about it that caused Dent to step into a fistful of trouble himself.

Keston had again come to the New Deck that night. He had sneeringly remained aloof from the poker game and his drinking was heavy. Dent served him, but kept a sharp eye on the morose, heavy face of the cattle-buyer. Keston started no trouble and probably would have been all right had not Paul Pace come in for his evening glass of wine.

The sight of the lean, thin cashier was like a red rag in front of a bull to Art Keston. His murky black eyes lighted with an evil joy when Pace came to the bar. The big man turned and his full beard split in a twisted grin.

"No wine for yuh tonight, milk-sop," he said loudly. "Yuh drink what I tell yuh."

A MUSCLE jumped in Paul's lean cheek and his eyes sparkled. Then the light left them. He placed his hands on the bar and looked patiently resigned. Before he could say anything, Dent picked up the wine bottle and poured a glass. He placed it before the cashier.

Keston moved swiftly and pushed the wine glass aside. It overturned and spilled, the stem breaking.

"I don't aim for him to drink that stuff," Keston said.

Dent Sturgis moved around the bar and planted himself before Keston. His powerful fists were doubled on his hips and his square face was tight with suppressed anger. There was a slight tremble in his voice.

"Keston, get this straight. My customers drink as they please, whenever and however. Yuh've been tryin' to start trouble here for weeks and I'm just about fed up with it."

"Big talk when yore friends are around yuh," Keston sneered.

His glance swung to the men who silently watched. Dent Sturgis took a deep breath and lowered his hands.

"My friends won't interfere, Keston. Now taw up or get out of here."

Keston's eyes narrowed. Without warning, he suddenly lunged forward and his fist shot out, connecting solidly with Sturgis' jaw. The saloonkeeper sailed backward, caught himself at the far end of the bar and hung there, dizzy and hurt. Keston laughed and started forward. A cold voice brought him up short and whirling around.

"Let him get on his feet, Keston," Paul Pace said. "You don't hit a man when he's down."

Keston's black eyes widened with surprise. Pace held a small-caliber Colt in his slender hand and Keston had no idea where it had come from. Keston licked his lips, then grinned widely.

"Yuh'll get hurt playin' with the big buttons," he chuckled. "I reckon I'd better take that away and spank yuh."

He took a step forward. Paul's face tightened and once more the muscle jumped in his lean jaw. Keston knew he had the upper hand. Pace would not shoot since Keston had made no move for his own holstered six. On the other hand, Keston's overwhelming strength would break the frail cashier once the giant fists started smashing. Keston's arm flexed and his eyes were mean and bloodshot.

Abruptly a hand grabbed his shoulder and whirled him half-about. He had only a flashing glimpse of Dent Sturgis, then knuckles exploded in his eyes. His head snapped back and he hit the floor with a thundering crash. But he was up in a moment, diving in low, catching Sturgis about his thick waist and driving the man the length of the bar.

Dent's shoulders hit the wall with a crash. His arms worked like savage pistons as he drove his fists deep in Keston's ribs. At last the cattle-buyer twisted away, backing to escape the punishing fists. Dent stepped in and his blow cracked loudly off Keston's jaw. The man stumbled backward, feet trying to catch up with the rest of him. He fell sprawling, and twisted to one side, lips snarling back.

His hand dropped down to his holster in a slashing move and the heavy gun cleared leather. Dent desperately tried to reach him and the rest looked on, stunned and helpless. Keston's Colt flashed up. Dent would never make it and he was aware of the fact. It showed in the white strain of his face.

A boot toe crashed into Keston's wrist and his thick fingers flew open. The Colt arched to the bar, bounced off it to the floor and skittered away. Paul Pace stepped back as Dent's flying body struck Keston and both men rolled along the floor in a mad tangle of legs and lashing fists.

It was soon over. Dent came on top. For an instant his stocky body straightened and his fists poised. It smashed home and Keston went limp.

Dent pulled himself to his feet, grabbed for the bar rail to steady himself. Then he turned and walked to the end of the bar, picking up a bucket. He dumped the contents over Keston, who sputtered, groaned and sat up.

"Get out of here," Dent ordered, "and don't yuh ever come back to the New Deck. I'll gun yuh on sight."

Keston glared at him, then painfully pulled himself to his feet. Paul Pace handed the man his Colt, the chamber emptied. Keston accepted it, growled under his breath, and shook the water from his eyes. He scooped up his hat and staggered out through the batwings.

"Pace, yuh saved my brisket," Dent said, still gasping for breath. "That snake would have drilled me shore."

"Better have Doc Renford patch up your face, Dent," Paul answered. "You'll scare your wife when you get home."

NOTHING more was said and the crowd gradually moved back to the tables. Dent washed his face in a small rear room and brushed off his clothes. He returned shortly, looking almost normal, except for a big mouse under one eye. He poured Paul another glass of wine.

"Yuh move fast, *amigo*," he said.

"I'm not quite the tenderfoot Keston thinks," Paul answered with a smile.

Dent leaned forward against the bar, his square face worried.

"You know that Keston ain't goin' to love yuh none," he warned. "I'd shore be loaded for bear was I you, from now on in."

Involuntarily Paul's hand moved up to his shoulder, then dropped away. He took a long sip of the wine, then studied the red liquor against the light. His voice held a shade of regret.

"I'm trying to be right peaceful," he said, "and Art Keston was the bank's first customer. It's getting hard."

Dent made a disgusted noise in his throat and downed the drink he had held in his bruised fist. He pointed a stubby finger at Paul and opened his mouth to say something. His lips snapped shut.

"Aw, forget it! Yuh'll have to find out for yoreself."

For a time, Art Keston kept pretty much to himself. Each day he would go to the livery stable, saddle his horse and ride out on the range. He would return late in the afternoon. At Mrs. Garver's bountiful table, he cast a blanket over the usual joking and good humor. He growled his requests and his lowering, red-eyed silence was a definite check on the conversation.

Paul Pace arranged quietly with Mrs. Garver to eat at a later table. In this way, there should be no cause for trouble with Keston. It seemed to those who watched that Pace did all he could to avoid the bullying cattle-buyer. Twice Keston had tried to pick a fight on Mrs. Garver's wide front porch, but Paul wouldn't be ruffled. He took the man's insults quietly and walked off, leaving Keston to fume at himself.

Rawhide as a whole couldn't understand it. Slight doubt, and then almost open talk went around that the new bank cashier was completely buffaloed by Keston. At last Doc Renford heard that Paul Pace was yellow. It came up one night at the New Deck and Doc instantly took up the challenge.

"I think you're making a mistake," he told a Rocking K hand. "Pace can take care of

himself, but he wants to keep out of trouble. I've seen men like him before."

The cowboy shrugged. "He shore would have drunk what Keston ordered the other night if Dent hadn't gone proddy."

"From what I hear," Doc replied. "he moved mighty fast when he had to. Keston would have killed Dent in another second."

"Yeah, he moves fast," the cowboy conceded, and scratched his red, tousled head. He grinned. "I shore wish roundup was over. I want to be right here in town when Keston and Pace finally lock horns. But I'll bet yuh a gold eagle right now, Pace backs down."

"I'll take the bet," Doc said readily, and both men handed their coins to Dent Sturgis.

The saloonkeeper placed them behind the bar and caught the faint discoloration under his eye in the bar mirror. His fingers lightly touched the slight bruise and he looked thoughtful. He turned around to the cowboy.

"Got another of them eagles to bet? I'll back Doc."

"Not me." The cowboy grinned. "I just punch the cows. I don't own 'em."

On the whole, Rawhide was too busy to devote all its interest to Keston and Paul Pace.

The roundups continued and approached their end. Cattle-buyers came flooding in from Pinto and other points, crowding Mrs. Garver's rooms and tables and keeping Dent Sturgis doubly busy each night at the New Deck.

Peg Strickland hauled supplies from Pinto to Lem's store, then out to the spreads as the ranchers bought to keep their crews in top-notch working order. In the midst of all this, big wagons came rumbling over the War Bonnets bringing the material for the new bank building. Carpenters and masons came. Rawhide was filled to overflowing.

The foundation work on the bank building started. Art Keston came and went, hardly speaking to anybody, but always eager to prod Paul Pace. The cashier quietly avoided the man as much as he could and, with the new crowd that had flooded in, that was an easy job.

Money began coming in from the ranches as the buyers concluded their deals and the ranchers sold their herds at top prices. Pace accepted the money and placed it in the small but heavy safe that squatted behind the partition in the stage station.

LEM, Doc and Krannert watched the deposits grow with a feeling of satisfaction. Krannert came to deposit the proceeds from the Rocking K and he beamed at Paul Pace as he shoved the yellow-backed bills through the grille.

"Rockin' K done had a good season," he chuckled.

"Looks like it," Pace agreed. He talked as he counted the money and made out the entry. "You're just about the last spread."

"Diamond Bar's still workin'," Krannert said, and nodded.

"Did Keston make you an offer on your cows?" Pace asked.

Krannert looked surprised.

"Ain't seen hide or hair of him. I reckon he's been in touch with some of the other spreads."

"Might be," Pace agreed, and shoved the pass-book to Krannert.

He watched the rancher leave the building, then slowly rubbed his hand along his jaw.

"Blamedest cattle-buyer I ever heard of," he muttered. "How can he buy anything on hoofs with only two hundred on deposit? Unless he's been to the Diamond Bar, Keston hasn't talked to a single rancher."

At that moment Keston's hulking shoulders pushed open the stage station door. For a moment the sound of hammers on wood was loud from the new bank building. Then that cut off short as Keston slammed the door. He strode to the window and thrust some bills at Pace.

"Some more *dinero* for yore little tin bank. I reckon if the ranches trust it, I can."

Pace hastily closed the door of the small safe but not before Keston's glittering eyes had noted the piles of currency. The big man's fingers beat an impatient tattoo on the ledge while Pace counted the money and made the entry for a thousand dollars.

"Roundups are about over, ain't they?" Keston growled the question.

Pace nodded and returned the book. The cattle-buyer jerked his eyes away from the window as the cashier caught the speculative look in them. Pace answered the man's question, keeping his voice impersonal.

"Most of them are over. All the cattle sold."

"I found that out," Keston snapped. "None left to buy."

Pace gave no reply, though Keston seemed to expect one. He shoved the pass-book in a stained shirt pocket and turned on his heel, walking out of the building. Will Dean came over from his section of the office. He jerked his thumb toward the door.

"That hombre actually tried to be human," he marveled.

Pace nodded. "It worries me. Will, reckon I could borrow your carpetbag?"

"Shore," Will answered in surprise. His brows arched higher when Pace asked the next question.

"Reckon Zeke Brown would rent me a stall in his stable, with a lot of hay in it?"

"Yuh buyin' a hoss?" Will Dean exclaimed.

"Not exactly." Pace smiled faintly and added cryptically, "But you can never tell where a horse will land."

After the bank closed, Paul Pace busied himself making up the daily balance, checking the cash, and sacking up some nuggets for later sale at Pinto. Will Dean had brought the carpetbag and it sat by Pace's feet. The lean cashier thoughtfully dropped the sacked nuggets into it, then looked around the little space behind the partition.

Satisfied, he continued with his work. An hour or so later, he left the stage station, carrying the carpetbag, and walked around the corner to the livery stable. Only Zeke Brown was there at the moment and Paul Pace looked pleased. He disappeared into the stall he had rented and in a short time emerged again, this time without the satchel.

His next stop was at Lem Adams' General Store. He passed the time of day with the white-haired storekeeper, spoke briefly about the bank's good prospects. He was in no hurry and seemed to be waiting for something. A customer came in and instantly Pace became all business. His voice raised.

"Lem, do you have a cot you could sell me?"

"Cot!" Lem exclaimed. "Mrs. Garver's beds is plumb comfortable. Ain't no better even in Pinto."

"That's right," Pace said patiently, "but I aim to sleep in the bank for a spell. There's a heap of money in that safe."

Lem's face brightened, then he looked sharply at Pace, and glanced hurriedly at the customer, a cowboy from the Diamond Bar. Pace apparently did not notice the man.

"The big vault in the new building will be ready soon," he went on, "and I'll feel better when the money's safe in that. Any sort of a cot, Lem, and a couple of blankets and a pillow."

PACE appeared to catch sight of the customer for the first time, and he said nothing more. Lem hauled out the cot and blankets from his stores. Pace made two trips to the stage station, and the second time back, Lem halted him. There was no one in the store.

"Yuh think someone might hold up the bank?" Lem asked, running his fingers through his thick mop of white hair.

"There's always that chance," Pace answered and then added a word of encouragement. "I don't think it'll happen here, but I'm just playing safe."

Lem nodded and Pace left the store. Lem worried about the bank until closing time, then he walked to the stage station. It was dark and locked up. Beside it, the gaunt framework of the bank building loomed against the sky. Lem felt a thrill of pride. The town had a bank and in a short time it would be done, money safely behind the thick doors of the vault.

He turned back toward home, a little lonely now that his daughter was married to Doc Renford. His thoughts were on the town and he felt a deep surge of pride. Lem Adams had nursed Rawhide along, building it up so that now it was almost ready to stand on its own two legs. At one time his store and house had been the only two buildings at these cross-roads. Now look at it!

Lem took a deep breath. There was the schoolhouse down by Squaw Creek, a livery stable and corral, Yancey Colver's blacksmith shop, the New Deck Saloon and now the bank building, to say nothing of the church the new parson planned on building. Ranches spread out over the plain that had once been empty. Miners worked color up in the War Bonnets and the town grew richer as time went on. Yes, Rawhide was growing up and growing fast.

For two nights Paul Pace slept in the bank, and during the day he never failed to mention it. It was the first time he had ever talked so much about himself and his business, and Rawhide noticed it. Lem became frankly worried, and so did young Doc Renford.

"Right now it don't matter so much, I reckon," Lem told his son-in-law, "but still Pace hadn't ought to keep mentionin' all that *dinero* he's got. Was this a bigger town, say like Pinto, some renegades might get plumb greedy."

"I know." Doc nodded. "I'll give Paul a warning the next time I see him."

"Colonel Short would blow sky-high if he heard Paul talkin'," Lem said irritably.

"A couple of more days and the vault'll be ready, Lem," Doc said cheerfully, " and then the money will be safe."

"Shore, but all that roundup *dinero's* in the stage station," Lem mourned. "Diamond Bar just made its deposit today. It'd ruin all of us was the bank to be robbed right now."

Just before noon the next day, Art Keston came out of Mrs. Garver's rooming house and strolled down the street to the cross-roads. He stopped by Lem's store and took a long time to roll a cigarette. Will Dean came out of the stage station and started for his noon meal at Mrs. Garver's. He passed Keston and nodded gruffly at the man's rasping greeting.

Art grinned in his beard and watched Dean go on up the street and disappear. Then Art moved on, unhurried. He entered the livery stable and came out in a short time with his saddled horse.

"Be back by sundown," he told Zeke. "Got a deal for cow critters south of here."

He didn't mount, but led the horse back around the corner and tied it loosely to the hitch-rack before the stage station. He hitched up his gun-belt and pushed inside. No one in Rawhide paid the slightest attention to him.

Keston closed the door behind him and his dark eyes cut around the room.

Only Paul Pace was there, and he could hear the cashier moving behind the partition. Then the lean, bony face appeared at the grilled window.

"I'm drawin' out my *dinero,*" Keston said.

"Twelve hundred dollars." Pace nodded.

He reached in the small safe and drew out a sheaf of bills, the door shielding the contents from Keston. The cattle-buyer smoothed his beard and his eyes moved to the outer door and window. No one was in sight.

Pace shoved the money through the wicket, placed the withdrawal slip on a spindle. Keston counted the money slowly and carefully, Pace watching him. Still counting, Keston moved away from the window closer to the door that opened through the partition.

ABRUPTLY Keston whirled and his heavy shoulder struck the door, banging it back on the hinges. His hand streaked down to his holster and the Colt whipped out. It lined down on Pace, whose hand had dropped to the cash drawer. The cashier froze as he stared down into the muzzle of the heavy Colt.

"I'll take that bean shooter." Keston grinned. "Back up to the wall."

Pace slowly withdrew his hand and moved back. He wore a dark suit, the coat gaping open, and Keston's grin grew wider. Cashiers should learn to wear guns. He advanced to the drawer and picked up a long-barreled slim .32. He contemptuously shoved it through the window so that it fell to the floor outside. Pace would never be able to reach it.

"I'm makin' some more withdrawals," Keston said. "All that's in the safe."

His menacing Colt forced Pace back and the man stood pressed against the wall. He was tense and still but there was no trace of fear in his calm gray eyes. They narrowed slightly as Keston moved to the safe. Art hooked his boot toe under the small door and swung it wide. His eyes dropped, and Pace leaned forward.

The mean eyes widened in surprise, then the bearded face swung angrily to Pace.

"Where's the *dinero?*"

"What I have is there," Pace answered evenly.

"Keep yore backbone against that wall," Keston snapped, "or yuh'll land in Boot Hill."

He knelt down and pawed through the few bills and papers with one hand. There was maybe a little over a couple of hundred dollars in bills, less than half of that in coins. Keston looked up, scowling.

"Where'd yuh hide the ranch *dinero*? It's here. I know it! Ain't no shipment gone to Pinto."

"All I have is there," Pace answered quietly. He smiled a little. "I thought I might have an unwelcome visitor some day. I had a big hunch it would be you."

Keston's brows drew down and his thick lips snarled back.

"Yuh're tellin' me where yuh hid that money, Pace. Yuh're talkin' fast before I blow out yore backbone."

"You don't dare shoot." The cashier smiled. "You'd never get out of Rawhide alive."

For a moment their glances locked, then Keston grinned more widely. He suddenly shoved his Colt in the holster.

"Mebbe I don't dare, yeller-back, but I can still make yuh talk. I been wantin' to mess up yore face some."

He slowly reached out a taloned, powerful hand, confidence showing in the wide grin that parted his bushy beard. Pace should have tried to avoid him. Instead, Pace moved with stunning speed. He grabbed Keston's hand and jerked forward. His right hand shot upward, the heel of the palm catching Keston under the chin, a blow that's more stunning than with the fist.

Keston's head snapped back and hurt surprise showed in the narrow eyes. With a savage wrench, he twisted free. He backpedaled, hand clawing for the gun. Pace didn't give him the chance. He smothered Keston's draw, and long, bony fingers with the grip of steel locked around the gun wrist.

Keston looped hard blows into Pace's body. The struggling men whirled, hit the flimsy partition and went through it with a rending, splintering crash of wood. Keston jerked free and both men went down, rolling apart.

Pace landed under the grilled window. The .32 lay close to his hand. He saw that Keston had twisted around, clearing his holster. He had already half drawn the heavy Colt.

Pace's fingers scooped up the .32 and he flung himself to one side as Keston's six thundered and roared. The slug plowed splinters in the floor beside Pace's body. The .32 barked sharply once and a look of blank surprise swept swiftly over Keston's face before it sagged in death, a little round hole in the forehead.

Paul Pace had just come to his feet when the front door burst open. Lem Adams, Doc Renford and half a dozen cowboys barged

in, guns drawn. They pulled up short when they saw Keston's huddled body, the light gun in the cashier's hand, and the splintered partition. . . .

"I had expected something like this," Pace told Lem after Keston's body had been removed. "The first day he came in here, he used a phrase I've heard renegades and robbers use before. 'Knock off a place' is owlhoot lingo."

"Where'd yuh run into renegades and robbers?" Lem asked, surprised. "Yuh've been a plumb peaceful gent. Even Keston figgered yuh was yellow."

Pace smiled gently and sighed. "I tried to be peaceful. When you've helped ramrod the law as a deputy for two years in a town like Abilene, you crave peace."

LEM whistled and Doc Renford chuckled. He turned to the Rocking K cowboy.

"How about that gold eagle?"

"It's yores," the redhead whispered.

"Keston was no cattle-buyer," Pace continued, "but I had no proof that he was anything else, either. Just a hunch, and the words he had used. But I became more certain of it when he tried to bully me, throw a scare into me. There was no sense to it, unless he figured to make me helpless scared when he robbed the bank. The money he deposited as part of the act was probably stolen somewhere else. When the ranch roundup money came in, I figured Keston would be about ready."

"But yuh told the whole blame town about the *dinero* and how yuh was goin' to sleep here to watch it!" Lem cut in.

"That was to make sure Keston would call for a show-down. The money, however, is buried in the straw in a stall I rented at Zeke Brown's livery stable. I left Keston's deposit here and just enough cash over to take care of business that might come along."

Lem scratched his head and then laughed ruefully.

"A peaceful gent! Just an ex-deputy from Abilene. A gent who deliberately prods a renegade into a gunsmoke show-down!"

"The sooner it was over, the sooner I could stay peaceful," Paul Pace answered. "Keston heard in Pinto of the new bank, I reckon, and that it was in temporary quarters." He looked up at Lem. "Rawhide needs a lawman now. It's growing."

Lem nodded soberly.

"She'll get her! I'll see the Pinto sheriff and he'll appoint a deputy. You'll wear the law badge, Pace."

"Not me." Pace shook his head. "I've hung up my guns for good. But get a deputy."

It was only later that Lem Adams remembered his prediction of trouble for the bank. He mentioned it to Krannert and the rancher pushed his hat back from his tanned face.

"Mebbe, Lem, but had yuh figured yuh got the idea backwards? Seems to me that when a sidewinder plans trouble, there's always some gent around to tangle his loop. That's the way I'll figger it, anyhow, since Paul Pace come to Rawhide."

Watch for More Rawhide Stories by Tom Parsons in Coming Issues!

"I am Zorro, but no rogue," the masked man said.

ZORRO FIGHTS A DUEL

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Once again Zorro's blade flashes red as an arrogant, merciless killer hurls defiance at the Fighting Hidalgo!

BY THE time Esteban Sanchez arrived at the inn on the plaza at Reina de los Angeles, the stage had been well set for his dramatic entrance.

Three hours before, a dusty rider had come off the highway to stop at the inn and announce the approach of his master, ordering the best quarters the inn could provide. The advance rider was not reticent about relating tales of his master's prowess.

"In Mexico, Senor Esteban Sanchez was the private bodyguard for a certain official of very high standing," the man reported. "To duel with my master, means certain death. He slew so many in combat that it was thought best he absent himself for a year, so he came to Alta California, and has been residing in Monterey."

Esteban Sanchez was a name known to many around Reina de los Angeles. He had

the reputation of being a wanton slayer. It was said he did more than protect and defend the man in whose service he had been in Mexico. He even sought quarrels, and when he could find none, made them himself.

The man's skill with a blade was well known. Certainly he was not a man to affront.

People began wondering what brought him to Reina de los Angeles, and whether he was coming solely to pick a quarrel with somebody and run him through.

News of Esteban Sanchez' approach flashed through the pueblo and out to the nearby ranchos.

There was quite a gathering around the plaza when Sanchez arrived.

He rode a splendid black horse, and an attendant on a swift riding mule followed him. This attendant, as well as the advance rider, resembled nothing so much as murderous thugs.

In front of the inn, where the advance rider now awaited him, Esteban Sanchez tossed aside his dust-covered cloak and descended from the heavy, silver-studded saddle his mount bore. He was tall and slender, and dressed in resplendent clothing. He had a thin face, piercing black eyes, and his manner was arrogant.

"Is this miserable hovel the best the place affords?" he demanded of the fat landlord, who was bowing and scraping and shivering in terror.

" 'Tis but a poor pigsty, Excellency, but the best we have," the landlord replied. "Your quarters have been prepared. You will find our food good and wholesome. I have sent out to a certain rancho for some wine much better than I usually have for sale."

"My baggage is coming on a cart which should be here by nightfall," Sanchez said. "I'll cleanse myself of the highway dirt. Let me have cold food and wine immediately, and see that this evening's repast is plentiful and well served."

The landlord bowed again and turned to lead the way into the inn. Sanchez drew himself up to his full height and glared at those who had been watching and listening. Then he started to follow the landlord.

A peon servant was standing innocently at the side of the door. He was not in Sanchez' path, but Sanchez chose to believe so. He struck savagely at the man with his heavy riding whip.

"One side, scum!" he barked. "You stench the air."

Sanchez struck again. The peon retreated with a cry of fear and pain. The newcomer finally entered the inn, where a few men were drinking wine and playing at cards and dice in the big common room.

PERFUMED hot water was now ready for Esteban Sanchez' bath. One of his men played valet, whilst the other, out in the stable, rubbed down Sanchez' horse, cooled him off, gave him water and food and led him to a stall. The stains of his journey washed away and his attire changed, Sanchez strolled again into the common room of the inn with his man in attendance.

Only a few men were in the common room, who disappeared rapidly. There remained only the landlord and a native servant who was trying to drive out the flies.

"What a hole!" Sanchez roared. "Is there no life about? Do you have no business here, landlord? Do not the men of this pueblo drink wine, play at cards and dice? I like amusement, entertainment. At night, I like lights and music, sparkling wine, the dice cup—"

"Perhaps, Senor Sanchez, everybody here is afraid of you," the landlord suggested.

"Afraid of me? If I have indeed come here to trouble some man, you may be sure he is not a hanger-on at a tavern. I do not soil my blade with such foul blood, senor."

His blade was at his side, and the landlord glanced at it. Hilt and scabbard were studded with precious stones. The landlord shuddered at thought of that blade. It had let out the life blood of many men, if reports were correct.

Sanchez drank a goblet of wine, made a wry face, and then clapped his hands to summon the man attending him.

"We will go to the presidio, so I may pay my respects to the commandante," Sanchez decided.

The presidio and troopers' barracks was only a short distance away. Esteban Sanchez walked there with his man a stride behind him. It was just after the siesta hour, and men and women were strolling around the plaza, taking the air. They beheld Sanchez' arrogant progress and saw him boot a native who got too close to him.

"If Senor Zorro hears of this man's acts—" a man whispered to another.

The mysterious Senor Zorro, it was said, dealt violently with those who mistreated or persecuted peons and natives. He had, it seemed, the strange idea that they were human beings and entitled to certain rights. This proud, arrogant, merciless killer who had lately arrived, was the sort of man Senor Zorro liked to stretch to earth.

At the presidio, Sanchez introduced himself to Sergeant Manuel Garcia and demanded to see the commandante. He was ushered to the private quarters of Capitán Ortega, who arose and bowed as he entered.

"I have heard much of you, senor," Ortega flattered his visitor. "It delights me that I meet you at last. If I may be of service to

you, command me. You are passing through?"

"I am here on important business, Capitán," Sanchez announced. "Would I travel so far to such a place as this for pleasure?"

Sanchez brought forth a document and tossed it upon the table between them. Ortega unfolded it and read, and his eyes bulged.

"So that is the way of it?" he asked.

"That is the way of it, Capitán Ortega. The Governor has decided that this Senor Zorro is too much for you and your men. He wants the rogue handled. So, I have been sent here on a special mission."

"You will slay him?" Ortega queried.

"I must contrive to have a quarrel with him and meet him," Sanchez explained. "I'll fight him, but not slay him. I'll wound him enough to render him helpless, but he is to be saved for the rope and a public hanging.

"The Governor desires to make an example of him. After I have wounded him, Capitán, you will take charge of him. The reward for his capture will go to you, half for yourself and the other half to be shared by your men."

"Ah!" Ortega said, his eyes gleaming. "I was fearing there would be no reward."

"You and your men may have it all. I am being well paid for this work," Sanchez said. "The greatest difficulty, I fear, will be to meet this Senor Zorro and fight him. I must do something to get him out into the open, possibly taunt him publicly. He may not be eager to cross blades with me, since I have a reputation as a swordsman."

"It is my opinion that he would not dare refuse an open challenge to fight," Ortega replied. "If he did that, he would lose prestige. Those he claims to befriend would deem him a coward and turn against him."

"I shall start my work at once," Sanchez said. "We must not appear too friendly, or this Zorro may scent a trap. I'll keep you advised, while you can inform me if the rascal is seen. Let my reason for being here remain a mystery. I am eager to end this task and return to Monterey. There is a senorita in Monterey who has engaged my interest. You comprehend?"

"Fully, senor," Ortega replied, his white teeth flashing in a knowing smile.

FOR several days thereafter, Senor Sanchez proceeded to make himself particularly obnoxious. Peons and natives learned to keep their distance from him. He was ever ready with his whip or a kick or cuff if they got within range.

He played cards and diced at the inn each evening, with passing traders and travelers off the highway, but sought a quarrel with none. But the landlord's native servants were so loath to serve him that the landlord was compelled to do it himself, making it appear that he did so as a special mark of respect.

Came an evening when the common room of the inn was crowded and Senor Esteban Sanchez was playing cards at the long table beneath the open window. Several troopers were in the place. Capitán Ortega was at the card table with Sanchez, while Sergeant Garcia watched over the presidio.

Don Diego Vega strolled into the inn, shuffling as he walked, and yawning as was his wont. He was dressed in his usual finery, and his shoulders, instead of being erect to give a hint of a caballero's hauteur, were stooped as though beneath the weight of the world.

Several men of lesser degree knuckled their foreheads in respect as Don Diego entered and went toward the counter in a corner of the common room. Here the landlord sold certain commodities.

"Who is that popinjay?" Sanchez asked Capitán Ortega.

"He is Don Diego Vega, son of Don Alejandro," Ortega whispered. "A thorn in his father's flesh! About as much spirit as a shellfish. He is a sorry jest, but must be treated with respect because of his father's standing."

"I will speak to him," Sanchez said.

Brushing aside Ortega's protests, Sanchez lurched to his feet and approached the counter, Ortega a short distance behind him. The landlord was bowing and rubbing his hands, for Don Diego visited the establishment seldom, and each visit was an event, giving the inn tone and prestige.

"A jar of that special honey, senor," Don Diego was telling the landlord. "I delight to smear it upon cold tortillas and devour it in the evenings when I am reading the works of the poets."

The landlord got a jar from a shelf. "This honey is from bees who take it from the blossoms of wild sage," he explained. "I get a small quantity of it from a man who has a hut on the edge of the desertland."

Don Diego yawned again, and tossed down a coin. He picked up the jar of honey and turned to glance around the room. At that instant, Esteban Sanchez appeared beside him.

"You are Don Diego Vega, are you not?" Sanchez asked. "Capitán Ortega so informed me. I am spending a short time in Reina de los Angeles, and was glad to have the opportunity to make your acquaintance. I am Esteban Sanchez."

Don Diego looked at him coldly. "Have I asked your name, senor?" he questioned.

"I do not like your attitude, senor," Sanchez exploded. "I am used to being treated with respect."

"Possibly by men afraid of you," Don Diego said. "I have heard of you, senor, and know something of your history. You are a hired murderer, I believe."

"Senor!" Sanchez cried. "Do not try me too far. If you do, hidalgo or no, I'll ask you to fight me."

"Fight you, senor?" Don Diego smiled a little. "Let me inform you, senor, that a man of my blood does not cross blades with such as you."

"Perhaps it is fortunate for you that you do not."

"It is quite true, Senor Sanchez, that you have slain a few poor fellows," Don Diego continued. "But there is an ancient saying that for every good blade there is a better one. In Mexico, senor, you met foes of merit. Here in Alta California, your sword arm may grow stiff with disuse. You will scarcely find foes worthy of your steel. Unless this Senor Zorro—"

"What of him?" Sanchez asked, quickly.

"He is a highwayman of a sort, according to the authorities. Capitán Ortega and his sergeant, I believe, have crossed blades with him. The Capitán can tell you of the man. He might give you an interesting moment, senor."

"Zorro? Ha! The rogue has not shown himself since I have been around Reina de los Angeles. No doubt he has his reasons. Nothing would please me more than to cross blades with the rascal. But how am I to find him?"

"That is beyond me, senor," Don Diego said, smiling. "It is said, however, that Senor Zorro attacks men who mistreat the natives and peons. If you do so, senor, perhaps he will make himself known to you."

"This Senor Zorro is more a legend than anything else," Sanchez declared, in a voice all in the common room of the inn could hear. "He has been fortunate in a few instances, so men think he is a swordsman. Here and now, I challenge him to come to me, meet me with his blade. He is an arrant coward if he does not. If any in this room know him, carry him my message."

SANCHEZ swung back to the gambling table with Capitán Ortega at his heels. Don Diego Vega calmly clutched his jar of honey and strolled forth into the night.

For several days more, Esteban Sanchez raged about the town, denouncing Senor Zorro as a coward, meanwhile kicking or cuffing a native or peon whenever he had opportunity.

Don Diego Vega heard of the man's acts continually. One afternoon, after the siesta, he had speech with Don Alejandro, his father.

"My son, this Esteban Sanchez is becoming a pest," Don Alejandro said. "This morning, I have learned, he beat a peon until the man was unconscious. And he howls continually that Senor Zorro is afraid to face him, blade in hand."

"He is a noisy fellow," Don Diego agreed.

"Regarding the Zorro matter, my son . . . I have heard certain whisperings. People are commencing to say that Zorro should handle this Sanchez rogue for mistreating natives and the poor peons, and that evidently Zorro is afraid to do so."

"So they think Zorro a coward, my father?"

"It amounts to that. Once people acquire an idea, it takes work to remove that idea from their minds. People know the reputation of this fellow Sanchez for skill with a blade, and possibly believe Zorro fears him."

Don Diego smiled slightly and glanced up as a servant entered the room. He was Bernardo, Don Diego's personal man. He had brought a serape for Don Diego to throw around his shoulders.

Only three men knew that Diego was Senor Zorro, that he put aside his lethargy at times and rode, using his blade in defense of the weak.

His father was one. Bernardo was another, but the native servant was a mute and could not tell the secrets he knew. He would not have told had he been able to do so. The third man was aged Fray Felipe, of Mission San Gabriel, who was Diego's confessor. So he would not speak, of course.

"My father," Diego said now, so that Bernardo could also hear, "I believe this Esteban Sanchez was sent here to kill Zorro. I have been watching and listening. He is often in conference with Capitán Ortega, and they seem to be planning something."

"That is possible, my son."

"I have heard the man is good with a blade. I do not fear for Zorro on that account. What I fear for Zorro is a trap. Perhaps, if Zorro meets this Sanchez and duels with him, he will find, if he wins, that he is surrounded by the soldiery."

"A trap is a possibility," Don Alejandro sagely admitted.

"But Zorro must do something at once, my father. I know the people are murmuring. They must not lose faith in Zorro."

"My son, let us have a decision," Don Alejandro said. "The man is a peril, so I counsel nothing. It is for you to make the decision. Because you fight for the Right, your sword arm will be given strength."

"I have decided," Don Diego said. "Zorro will meet this boasting murderer."

Don Alejandro sighed and relaxed, and Bernardo gave a gurgle which meant he was pleased.

"I must play a game with the rogue," Diego

continued. "I must make him raging mad, taunt him into a frenzy. Then I must contrive to meet him where he and I can fight it out fairly."

Diego gave Bernardo orders, and Bernardo hurried away. That night, Diego slipped from the house and went to a certain hut. There he put on his black Zorro costume over his other clothes. He donned his mask and black sombrero, making sure his pistol was in readiness and that his blade would slip easily from its scabbard. He did not intend to fight this night, but it was best to be prepared.

The pueblo grew quiet. At the tavern, men were drinking and gambling in the common room. A sleepy watchman prowled around the plaza. At the presidio, most of the troopers were asleep. The guards lounged around the entrance.

ON HIS black horse, Zorro thundered out of the night. Down the highway from the north he rode into the town. His horse scattered barefooted natives in front of the inn. Through the open window above the card table, Zorro tossed a rock with a sheet of parchment wrapped around it. Then he was away, the thundering of his mount's hoofs dwindling in the distance.

The rock had knocked over a candelabra within a few feet of Esteban Sanchez. It was Sanchez who read the scrawl on the parchment. He gave a howl of rage and tossed it upon the table for others to read:

Esteban Sanchez is a cowardly murderer. He beats peons and natives who are helpless against him. I would meet him in fair fight and punish him, but how am I to do so? How and where could we fight without Capitán Ortega and his troopers coming to Sanchez' aid? Let Sanchez speak his mind about this matter, and news of his talk will reach me.

"Nothing could give me greater pleasure than a chance to cross blades with the rascal," Sanchez declared, as he paced boldly around the room while the others watched him. "I'll run him through, tear off his mask and reveal his identity to the world. If any here know him, carry him this word."

Late that night, when Esteban Sanchez retired to his own rooms, he found another sheet of parchment on his couch. The scrawl on it read:

Ride out the San Gabriel road, senor, at midmorning tomorrow, and perhaps you will encounter me.

Zorro

Sanchez showed the parchment to his two attendants, then sent one to carry it to Capitán Ortega at the presidio. Ortega went quickly to the inn and to Sanchez' quarters, careful not to be observed.

"If the rogue contacts you, we have him," Ortega declared. "Before dawn, I'll send Sergeant Garcia and a few troopers out on the road to take up stations. They will keep in hiding and be ready to respond to an alarm."

In the middle of the morning on the following day, Esteban Sanchez mounted his horse and rode forth. One of his attendants had ridden before him on a mule, while the other followed behind at a distance.

Sanchez rode leisurely, watching ahead and to either side like a man fearful of ambush. Each clump of trees or stand of thick brush engaged his careful scrutiny.

He passed some of the ambushed troopers. But Senor Zorro did not appear. Sanchez turned back after traveling almost all the way to Mission San Gabriel, and finally came to the inn.

"This rogue of a Zorro left a warning that he would meet me this morning on the San Gabriel road," Sanchez announced to those at the inn. "But he did not disclose himself. He turned coward at the last moment, no doubt. I'll have his ears if I ever can meet him. I will pay a generous reward to any man who will tell me how he may be reached."

Late that night, as the drinking and gambling were at their height in the tavern, hoofs thundered again, and Zorro came riding into the town. Another rock sailed through the window. A man tore the parchment off it, read, and handed it to Sanchez:

The hired murderer came out to meet me this morning with one of his thugs riding in advance and the other following. Also, troops were in ambush along the road. Is it a duel when a man must fight a small army? This Esteban Sanchez has shown himself a craven, unworthy of my steel.

Zorro

Sanchez raged like a madman as he strode around the room. The native servants kept out of his reach. One by one, those in the common room of the inn departed, fearing they might become involved in a quarrel and feel cold steel slip between their ribs.

Sanchez found, in the two days following, that men were looking at him askance. He knew they had been whispering that he had dealt unfairly by riding to a meeting with Zorro when troopers were in ambush along the way.

"How can I meet this Zorro rogue?" he shouted. "How may I bring him out of hiding? I want to meet him fairly. I do not seek to take an advantage. True, troopers were along the road the other morning, but that was because Capitán Ortega has orders

to capture this Zorro if possible. If my word could reach him, I would say that I will meet him alone at any time."

For two more days, Zorro kept silent. Esteban Sanchez raged around the town, beating natives and peons when he could, strolling around the plaza at siesta hour and being ignored by the better people. He shouted that the mysterious Zorro was a coward and afraid to meet him.

THE people began murmuring discontentedly. Don Diego Vega learned of their words. Why did not Senor Zorro punish this arrogant, cruel man, they were asking. Could it be possible that Zorro feared an encounter?

"It is time. This afternoon," Don Diego told his father.

"You have made plans, my son?"

Diego nodded, then clapped his hands to summon Bernardo. Don Alejandro made sure nobody was within earshot.

"Bernardo, Zorro must attend to a rascal tonight," Don Diego said. "I must confront this Sanchez in the common room of the inn, it appears, if I ever am to meet him at all. I will appear before him at a time when there are no troopers present. You will have important things to do."

Bernardo gurgled, and his eyes gleamed.

"The fog will roll in from the sea tonight," Don Diego continued. "It will be dark and misty. You will be on your riding mule beside the patio wall at the inn. After my work is done, I'll get outdoors, and you will ride furiously, so others will believe Zorro has mounted his horse and escaped."

Bernardo bobbed his head violently to indicate he understood. It was a game they had played before.

"I will not need the black horse tonight," Diego resumed. "But, after you have ridden away and stabled your mule, return to the inn and gather up Zorro's garments from beside the patio wall."

Bernardo bobbed his head again, and withdrew. Don Diego lifted a goblet and took a sip of wine.

"Use great care tonight, my son," his father said. "This Esteban Sanchez is a scoundrel, but do not forget he is expert with a blade. He will not be like the others you have fought."

"I will use my utmost skill, my father."

"I will go to the chapel and say a prayer for you."

"I thank you, father. It is not in my mind to slay the rascal."

"If you do not, his wound will mend, and you will only have to fight him again at a later day. And, once he is repaired, he will mistreat natives and peons as before."

"It would be worse than death for such a man were he so injured that he never could wield blade again," Diego said. "A slash in his sword arm at the proper place, and it would be done."

The heavy fog was rolling in from the sea before the darkness came. Few persons were abroad.

Even the peons and natives were keeping to their huts.

Don Diego read poetry until he thought the hour was right. Then he nodded to Bernardo, and the two of them slipped out of the house and went to the hut where Zorro's attire was hidden.

"Get your mule, and go to the inn," Zorro directed, in whispers, as he dressed. "Be sure you are not seen. Do not fail me tonight, Bernardo."

Bernardo bobbed his head and left the hut. Don Diego slipped on the black costume of Zorro, put on the mask, made sure pistol and blade were ready, and left the hut also.

There was a heavy mist in the air, and the few lights around the plaza were but yellow blotches in the night. Senor Zorro walked warily, listening to every sound. He slipped past the adobe huts of some natives, avoided the corner of the plaza, and finally approached the inn from the rear.

His thoughts were busy. Esteban Sanchez, he knew, whatever his character, was a swordsman of repute. This would be an affair where Senor Zorro would have to call on the last bit of his cleverness if he was to escape the ordeal unharmed.

At the corner of the long low tavern building, he stopped in the misty darkness to watch and listen. Across the plaza, some inebriated individual was singing raucously as he went home. No horses were at the hitching posts in front of the inn. It was not a night for some innocent stroller to be about and see a furtive figure slipping along the wall of the tavern toward a window.

Zorro waited until he was sure Bernardo was in position on his mule. He slipped close and whispered:

"Use great care, Bernardo. When I cry the signal, ride like a madman, circle, and put up your mule. Then slip back afoot and get my costume and blade, which I'll put here by the wall, if things go right."

Bernardo made a guttural sound to indicate that he understood, and Zorro slipped on through the night. He approached an open window through which light streamed, and stopped beside it to listen.

He could hear Esteban Sanchez plainly enough.

"More wine, landlord!" Sanchez howled. "It is a night for drinking. We must wash the fog out of our throats. And bring a cold joint and a carving knife. We can eat and drink as we dice."

ZORRO raised his head cautiously and peered into the room from the side of the window. Sanchez was sitting at the end of the gambling table, and some traders off the highway were playing with him. A few loiterers of the town were on benches in a corner, where the landlord served his cheapest wine.

No doubt they hoped to be invited to share Sanchez' bounty.

Zorro dropped down, moved to the other side of the window and peered in once again, at the other side of the big common room. A native servant was wiping goblets at the counter, while another was hanging a fresh wineskin.

The door from the kitchen was hurled open. A native entered bearing a huge platter upon which was a cold joint of roast. He carried the platter to the end of the gambling table. His eyes gleamed as he watched Esteban Sanchez, his nervousness apparent to all.

He placed the platter on the corner of the table, then put the heavy carving knife beside it, as well as a huge loaf of tough bread and a heap of tortillas. The pile of tortillas started to slip. The servant grasped them quickly, and jostled Sanchez' arm.

"Devilment!" Sanchez roared. "Clumsy lout!"

Sanchez sprang to his feet and gave the native a blow that sent him spinning against the corner of the big fireplace. He grabbed the man before he could escape, jerked him to his feet and floored him with a blow to the face.

"Crawl away, scum, and let me not see your face again!" Sanchez roared. "Go tell your friend, Zorro, that I have cuffed you! I'd cuff this Zorro also, did I only have a chance to get at the craven."

"You have the chance, senor!" a voice said at the door.

Zorro had witnessed the attack on the native, had left the window and darted along the wall of the building to the front door. He had pulled the door open, entered and closed it behind him.

But a man approaching the inn from across the plaza had seen the masked man in black as he had passed through the streak of light, and had turned to run to the presidio with the alarm, hoping to share in any subsequent reward.

There was swift silence in the room after Zorro's shout. The half-conscious native servant ceased whimpering and crawled slowly along the wall, his eyes agleam. The men on the benches in the corner and those at the gaming table acted as if suddenly turned to stone.

Esteban Sanchez braced himself against the adobe wall and bent forward slightly.

"You are the rogue they call Senor Zorro?" he demanded.

"I am Zorro. But no rogue, senor. Only a man who defends the helpless, such as the native you have just beaten. I am a caballero, senor, and you are not fit to cross blades with me. But men like you must be punished."

"And you expect to punish me, senor?" Sanchez asked, laughing.

"I should have no difficulty in doing so. You are an arrant coward, senor. You beat helpless men, and have slain a few poorer swordsmen with your blade. I have come here to meet you, taking a chance that you will not have me ambushed. I see one of your thugs in the corner."

"We'll fight fair!" Sanchez roared. "I'll slit you open, tear off your mask, see your face. Nobody is to interfere."

"I'll see to that, senor," Zorro replied. "I hold my pistol in my left hand as we fight, to use against any man who may try to attack me. Draw your blade, senor, if you have the courage."

The fat landlord was wringing his hands behind his counter. The men in the room got up quickly and flattened themselves against the walls. Esteban Sanchez gave a bellow of rage and whipped blade from scabbard, while Zorro silently drew his weapon.

The flickering tallow torches cast an uncertain light over the room. The floor of beaten earth was smooth. The blades met and rang.

The fight began!

Both Zorro and Sanchez were wary at the start, trying to feel out each other. Sanchez, however, was eager to have an end of it. His many victories gave him overconfidence. He moved in swiftly and began pressing the fight.

Zorro retreated slightly, turned, kept on the defensive until Sanchez' violent attack had spent itself. He learned the feel of the other's wrist, the strength of his swordplay. He backed away, turned aside, got to a position where the light was favorable for him.

Then, Zorro pressed the fighting in turn. His blade slithered and flashed in the light. He drove Esteban Sanchez toward a corner, and Sanchez found himself fighting desperately to ward off a fatal thrust.

GREAT beads of perspiration stood out on Sanchez' face and glistened in the light. His face became a stern mask. He knew that he had met his equal, if not his master, and for the first time knew a little fear.

"Fight, poltroon!" Zorro screeched at him from behind his mask. "Fight, hired murderer! You were sent to Reina de los Angeles to slay me, were you not?"

"Slay you I shall!" Sanchez snarled back savagely.

His attack was ferocious, but Zorro had expected it. He gave ground slightly, parried swiftly. The blades rang in a continual music. Then Zorro's steel darted in, went home, and Zorro gave a twist and jerked his red blade away. Esteban Sanchez reeled back against the wall, a cry of pain ringing from his lips.

"I could have slain you, senor," Zorro said, as he watched the others. "But it is better this way. You'll never use your sword arm again, senor. You have slain your last man with a blade. Your arm will be an useless, withered thing, its muscles ruined—"

The door was hurled open, and from the corner of his eye Zorro saw Sergeant Manuel Garcia with a couple of troopers behind him. The kitchen door was opened also, and Capitán Ortega appeared with a couple more. They had responded to the alarm by the man who had seen Zorro enter the inn.

"So, it could not be a fair fight—" Zorro began.

The soldiers crouched and started to rush from both sides. Zorro's pistol exploded, smoke belched, and a slug flew past the head of Sergeant Garcia and thudded against the wall. He hurled the empty pistol at Ortega, whirled and darted back, and sprang through the open window.

"After him!" Ortega shouted.

Outside, Zorro ran along the wall to where Bernardo was waiting on the mule. He gave a wild cry that sounded like one of defiance. Bernardo started the mule.

Tumbling out of the inn, the troopers heard the pounding hoofs. Ortega was shouting for them to get their mounts and pursue. In the rear of the building, Zorro slipped out of his black costume and put it against the wall for Bernardo to get later, put his blade beside it, then shuffled around the building to the front.

He emerged from the darkness and into the streak of light which flowed from the open door of the inn. His breathing was now back to normal. It was Don Diego Vega who appeared, his shoulders bent, his general attitude one of disgust with the world.

Don Diego stepped through the door and into the room. Sanchez was seated at the end of the table, and two men were trying to bind up his wounded arm. The soldiers had rushed out and away.

The fat landlord was rushing around, wringing his hands and moaning.

"What is the meaning of this turbulence?" Don Diego asked in a bored tone.

"Zorro has been here. He has fought with Senor Sanchez," the landlord wailed. "Right here in my inn."

Don Diego walked slowly to the table and looked at Esteban Sanchez' pale face. His lips were twisted with pain.

"For every good blade, there is a better one," Don Diego quoted.

He turned away and beckoned the landlord.

"Try to calm yourself long enough to attend to my humble wants, senor," he ordered. "I have come through the foggy night to get another jar of that special honey. Get it for me, so I may return home quickly and resume my reading. I have a new volume of poetry newly come from Spain. There is in it a delightful verse on retribution."

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By SAM BRANT

Law music soothes a savage six-gun killer!

IT WAS quiet along the one and only street of the little cowtown. The rows of weather-beaten buildings slumbered in the heat of the bright summer day. Down at the Palace Saloon a roan cowpony standing in the shade at the hitch rail, stamped and switched a fly away with its tail.

Across the street Sheriff Eben Gardner sat

SHERIFF GARDNER

in his office talking to his deupty. The two lawmen were as different as night is from day. Jim Lance was young and impulsive and a dangerous man in a fight with guns or fists. The sheriff was in his fifties and he never had been one to get excited without cause. That wasn't Eben Gardner's way of doing things.

"Heard tell of a lone bandit that's been holdin' up the ranchers over south and stealin' their payrolls," remarked Lance, tipping his chair back on two legs against the wall. "Folks are callin' him the Coughing Coyote."

"Why a name like that?" Gardner stroked his saggy gray mustache. "This bandit got a cold or somethin'?"

"Just a habit he's got, I reckon," said the deputy. "Heard he always coughs before he speaks." Lance yawned. He was big and rawboned and dark haired. "Wish he would start workin' around here. I'd like to get that jasper. It been too quiet in Latigo lately."

"Don't say that," protested Gardner. "Last time I was with a man who started asking for trouble we blame near got killed by a rock fall. It's all right with me if this Coughing Coyote stays away from this part of the country."

Sheriff Gardner gazed out through the open window and watched a stranger step out through the swinging doors of the Palace. He was a big man dressed in range clothes. He looked salty. Gardner glanced at Lance and saw the deputy was also eyeing the stranger.

"That's Ed Horton," Lance said. "Rode into town early this mornin'. He's sort of waitin' for somebody. He's one of them fellers who talks a lot and don't really say nothin'."

The sheriff nodded. He was still watching the man across the street. Horton went to the roan horse and tightened the saddle cinch. From the building next to the sheriff's office came a deafening blast of sound. Horton's horse jumped.

"Oh, Lord!" muttered Eben Gardner in a moment of silence. "There goes Hank Wilson practicing on that slip-horn again. He may not be good but he shore is loud."

"Always hankered to play a trombone," began the deputy. "And—"

The rest of what Lance said was blotted out by the sounds that came from the trombone next door. Out in the street Ed Horton staggered as though he had suddenly grown very dizzy. Then he dropped, sprawling motionless in the dust.

TIM LANCE'S chair came down hard as he leaped to his feet. Sheriff Gardner came around his desk, moving fast for a man of his years. The two lawmen ran to the stranger lying in the street. Hank Wilson was trying to play "Home Sweet Home" and it was pretty bad.

"Shot in the back," Gardner said grimly after he had examined the man in the street. "Must have been a rifle fired from some distance away or we would have heard the shot."

"Is he dead?" Lance asked.

The sheriff nodded as he stood erect. He glanced up and down the street, his keen gaze searching the buildings that brooded in the hot sunlight. There was no sign of anyone up on the roofs. Gardner frowned. The blasting of the trombone was getting on his nerves.

"Go tell Hank to stop that noise," he said to the deputy. "Tell him there's been a killin' out here and there will be two of them if he don't quit."

"I'll tell him." Lance headed for the harness shop next to the sheriff's office. "Be right back."

Eben Gardner smiled a wintry smile. Jim Lance sounded excited. When he returned the deputy would probably be all for rounding up a posse and dashing after the dry-gulcher. He would be positive that the killer had left town.

People were appearing up and down the plank walks. The citizens of Latigo had seen the sheriff standing there with the dead man lying at the old lawman's feet and they wanted to know what it was all about.

Gardner decided there would be little use in searching all of the buildings of the town in the hope of finding the killer. The first thing the sheriff wanted to know was why Horton had been killed. The sound of the trombone stopped abruptly. It was quiet on the street. Three or four men and two women drifted closer and stood watching.

"What happened, Sheriff?" called Lem Garvey, who owned the Palace Saloon and tended his own bar in the day time. "That feller Horton dead?"

"He is." Gardner nodded. "Been shot in the back. A bullet entered his heart and killed him."

At the sheriff's orders two of the men picked up the body and carried it into the saloon where it was placed in a back room. Jim Lance joined Gardner and the harness maker was with the deputy.

"You and yore music, Hank," Gardner said. "If it hadn't been for that we would have heard where the shot came from right off."

"Maybe." Hank Wilson, was a thin middle aged man who looked like a turkey gobbler. "And then again somebody might have figgered my horn playin' would drown out the sound of a shot. At least as far as you and Jim hearin' it in the office was concerned, Sheriff."

"I thought of that," said the old lawman.

Eben Gardner was watching a rider who had entered the town from the south end of the street. When you had been sheriff in your part of the country for close to twenty years you got to know the folks around you right well, and could spot a stranger straight off. Gardner stared at the horseman.

"We got a visitor," Gardner said softly.

"Two of them," said Lance, as he looked in the opposite direction along the street. "Either one of 'em might have killed Ed Horton."

The sheriff nodded. The small crowd that had gathered was drifting away. It was too hot out on the street for the citizens of Latigo to hang around there without any particular reason. A man had been shot and killed and it was up to Sheriff Gardner to learn how and why. Folks in the town and in the surrounding ranches set a heap of store in the lawman, and there wasn't anyone figured he was too old for the job. Not Eben Gardner.

The two strangers rode closer. The one from the south was a thin faced man wearing worn range clothes, and with a Colt .45 in the holster on his right leg. He halted his mount close to where Horton's roan was still standing tied to the hitch rail. Horton never had finished untying his reins.

"Howdy, gents," the stranger said as he swung out of the saddle. "Shore is hot."

Gardner, Lance and Hank Wilson stood on the plank walk in front of the saloon, and there was no one else near them now. They nodded casually as the stranger spoke to them. His pinto was tired, and looked like it had recently been ridden far.

THE stranger tied his horse and came across the street.

"The name is Shawnee York," he said. "Figgered on meetin' a feller name Ed Horton here in Latigo today. Meybe yuh've seen him around."

"We've seen him." Sheriff Gardner was intently studying the saddle on York's horse, and he did not find what he sought. "Horton is still around."

"Permanently!" said Hank Wilson with a chuckle. The harness maker had a weird sense of humor.

The second stranger halted his horse in front of the general store further down on the opposite side of the street. He dismounted and tied the bay horse. He was thin and wiry, and his gray flannel shirt bulged a little in back just below the open collar.

"I'm Sheriff Gardner," said the old lawman to York. "And this is my deputy, Jim Lance. This other hombre is Hank Wilson, slip horn virtuoso."

"That's enough—ding it!" snapped Wilson angrily. "I've stood for a lot of hoorawin' over playing that trombone—but I ain't standin' for anybody callin' me names like that." He turned and stalked across the street, muttering, "slip horn virtuoso" under his breath.

The sheriff grinned and then his expression grew serious.

"We got bad news for you, York," Gardner

said. "Horton is dead. He was shot in the back out here on the street just a little while ago."

"That's right." Jim Lance glared at York. "Maybe you done it!"

"Horton is dead," repeated Shawnee York, and he sounded like the news hit him hard. "You're right, Sheriff. That's bad news a-plenty." He paid no attention to the deputy.

"What about it?" demanded Lance. "Did you kill him, York?"

York's eyes blazed. He swung a hard right that landed squarely on the deputy's chin. There was so much power behind the blow that it knocked Jim Lance off his feet. He went down on the plank walk with a thud, but he recovered quickly and was clawing for his gun as he scrambled to his feet.

"Quit it, Jim!" ordered the sheriff. "Leave yore gun alone. You got just what you deserved, accusing York of the killin' without a mite of proof."

"Me and Ed Horton were partners," said York, controlling himself with an effort. "We own a ranch over south—the H Bar Y. Ed was held up by the lone bandit they call the Coughing Coyote about two weeks ago. The masked man got nine hundred dollars we was goin' to use to pay our outfit."

"So you and Horton figgered yuh might run across the bandit over in this part of the country and decided to meet here in Latigo," said Sheriff Gardner. "Reckon yuh must have separated and each been searchin' for the Coughing Coyote up until today. Ain't that right?"

"It is." York stared at Gardner in amazement. "But how did you know?"

"The lone bandit couldn't get away with more than a few holdups over south," said the sheriff. "Reckon the ranchers over there have started takin' a few men with them as bodyguards when they get their payroll money in town and bring it out to their ranches."

"That's right." York nodded. "But how did yuh know me and Ed decided to meet here in Latigo?"

"Tomorrow is the first of the month," Gardner said. "And that is usually the time most ranchers pay off their men. So if the bandit aims to try any holdups around here, he'll have to do it tomorrow.

"Where is Horton's body now?" asked York.

"In the back room in the saloon," said the sheriff. "Come on, if you want to see him, York."

Gardner pushed in through the batwings with York close behind him and Lance following them. The deputy was still watching the stranger warily. When Jim Lance got an idea in his mind he stuck to it, and he still suspected York had killed Horton.

"Heard the Coughing Coyote held up three ranchers in one day over south on the first of last month," said York as he caught up with the sheriff and walked beside the old lawman across the floor of the bar room. "And two of those holdups happened twenty miles apart within an hour."

Sheriff Gardner halted abruptly and turned to the deputy.

"That stranger who rode in from the north, Jim," Gardner said. "Want you to find out all yuh can about him, and if he leaves town you follow him. Get goin'."

"All right." Lance turned and headed back for the door. He knew when to obey orders. "If that hombre acts suspicious I'll shore bring him in pronto."

GARDNER waited until Lance had left and then went to the door of the back room where the body had been placed. The door was closed. The sheriff glanced at York.

"Wait here a minute," commanded the lawman. "Somethin' I want to check on before you look at the corpse."

"Reckon I could stand a drink first at that," said York. "This has been right much of a shock to me." He headed for the bar.

The old sheriff stepped into the back room, closing the door behind him. The body was lying on two tables that had been pulled together and there was no one else in the room. Gardner quickly searched through the pockets of the dead man. He found a few papers and a big roll of bills. He counted the money. It was close to four thousand dollars. He thrust it in his own pockets in small bunches.

Satisfied, Gardner stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him. He walked over to York, who was just finishing a second straight whisky at the bar.

"All right, York," Gardner said. "You can go see him now. Reckon yuh will want to make arrangements for having him buried and all. The undertaker is down the street. I had the body brought in here because it was the nearest place. I'll be in my office if yuh want me."

He walked out of the saloon, and headed for the sheriff's office. He saw that Lance had saddled his horse and was trailing the wiry little man as the second stranger left town. Gardner decided he would have to talk to Lance when he returned. The deputy didn't need to make his trailing a man as obvious as all that.

A half hour later Gardner was sitting in his office looking over the papers he had taken from the dead man. One was a bill of sale for three hundred head of H Bar Y cattle—another was a notice that the mortgage a bank held on the ranch would be due in ten days.

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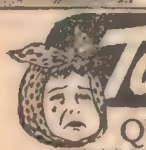

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The old sheriff got to his feet as he heard a noise out in back of the building. It was the rattling of tin cans back in the alley that ran behind the buildings on that side of the street. Gardner stepped out through the back door of the office. No sign of anyone there. He went back inside.

Shawnee York was standing just inside the front door of the office. There was something menacing about his attitude.

"I want that money Ed Horton had on him," York said curtly. "Hand it over, Sheriff."

"Of course you want that money," said Gardner coldly. "That's why yuh killed Horton." He smiled grimly as York reached for his gun. "Don't try it. You might be able to kill me, but folks in this town are right noticin'. They probably seen yuh come in here, and will hear the shot. You'll never get away alive." The old sheriff glanced out the window. "Not with yore hoss still tied across the street—and not another one nearer."

York scowled and drew his hand away from his gun as he realized the sheriff was right. The citizens of Latigo would hear the shot if he killed the lawman.

"What makes you so shore I killed Horton?" he demanded.

"Because you and Horton have been the Coughing Coyote," said Gardner. "Yuh tipped me off it was two men doin' them holdups when yuh said two of them happened within an hour twenty miles apart. No man is goin' to ride a hoss hard enough to be in both places in that length of time."

"Smart, aren't you," said York. "Why would a couple of ranchers suddenly turn bandits?"

"Because you and Horton were broke," said Gardner. "You sold most of yore stock, and a bank holds a mortgage on the H Bar Y. Yuh had to get money fast so yuh started the payroll holdups. You know when I first heard about the Coughing Coyote I figgered the bandit was an amateur. No real owlhoot rider would take a fool name like that or identify him by coughing every time before he spoke."

York snarled. His right hand flashed up and a knife went flying through the air. It parted the old sheriff's gray hair in the middle and sent blood trickling down his face as the blade pinned Gardner's hat to the wall.

Gardner grabbed for his guns. They were in his hands and roaring as York reached for his own Colt. York went down—a bullet in his chest and another in his right arm.

"Wonder where he hid his rifle," muttered Eben Gardner as he stared at the man on the floor. "Taking the scabbard off his saddle

(Turn to page 88)

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was smart. But he should have noticed that there was still marks left where it had rubbed against the leather."

HANK WILSON came bursting into the office with a gun in his hand. The harness maker looked at the sheriff and then at York who was moaning on the floor.

"So he was the killer," Wilson said. "Your head shore is a mess, Sheriff."

A few minutes later Jim Lance appeared and the stranger was with him. The deputy looked sheepish until he saw York and then he brightened up.

"This is a U.S. deputy marshal," he said nodding to the stranger. "Just passing through this part of the country. His name is Bill Wade. So I was right about York."

"Of course you were right," said the sheriff. "But never tell a man he's guilty until you can prove it."

"I looked up what you called me in the dictionary," said Hank Wilson. "So I'm a slip-horn virtuoso. A skilled musician, eh? That's shore flatterin', Eben."

"Reckon you better take yore own advice, Sheriff," said Lance with a grin as he tied up the cut on the old lawman's head. York had suddenly stopped breathing. He was dead. "Never tell a man a thing like that unless you can prove it!"

THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 6)

We receive numerous letters from time to time from rodeo fans who have made wagers or who have arguments as to who won the title of this or that event at the World's Championship Rodeo in Madison Square Garden certain years, and for the benefit of any who may now be in such arguments we give you the winners eight years right up to the present time, and here they are:

1937: Bareback bronc riding—Kid Fletcher, Hugo, Colorado. Calf roping—Roy Matthews, Fort Worth, Texas. Cowgirl's bronc riding—Brida Gafford, Casper, Wyoming. Saddle bronc riding—Paul Carney, Galeton, Colorado. Steer riding—Paul Carney. Steer wrestling—Rusty McGinty, Plains, Texas.

1938: Bareback bronc riding—Eddie Curtis, El Reno, Oklahoma. Calf roping—Jake McClure, Lovington, New Mexico. Cowgirl's bronc riding—Vivian White, Ringwood, Oklahoma. Saddle bronc riding—Burel Mulkey, Salmon, Idaho. Steer riding—Frank Marion, Ranger, Texas. Steer wrestling—Dick Truitt, Stonewall, Oklahoma.

1939: Bareback bronc riding—Paul Carney, Galeton, Colorado. Calf roping—Everett Shaw, Stonewall, Oklahoma. Cowgirl's bronc riding—Mildred Mix, Brady, Texas. Saddle bronc riding—Fritz Truan, Victorville, California. Steer riding—Mitch Owens, Blythe, Colorado. Steer wrestling—Harry Hart, Pocatella, Idaho.

1940: Bareback bronc riding—Hank Mills, Montrose, Colorado. Calf roping—Toots Mansfield, Bandera, Texas. Cowgirl's bronc riding—Alice Greenough, Red Lodge, Montana. Saddle bronc riding—Jackie Cooper, Newhall, California. Steer riding—Dick Griffith, Scotsdale, Arizona. Steer wrestling—Howard McCrory, Deadwood, South Dakota.

1941: Bareback bronc riding—Hank Mills, Montrose, Colorado. Calf roping—Clyde Burk, Comanche, Okla-

(Turn to page 90)

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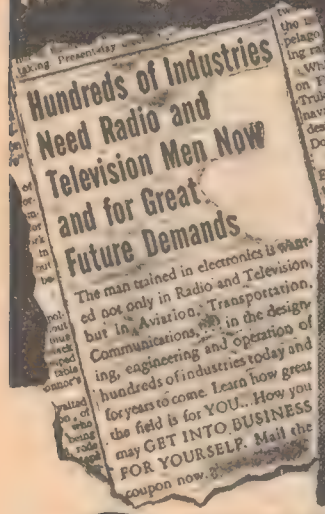
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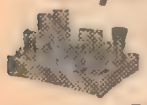

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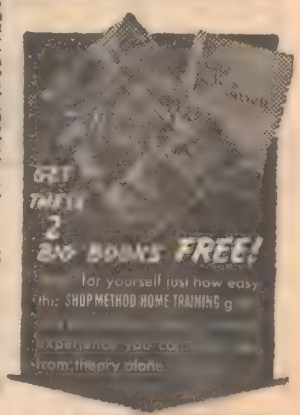
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homa. Cowgirl's bronc riding—Vivian White, Ringwood, Oklahoma. Saddle bronc riding—Chet McCarty, Hotchkiss, Colorado. Steer riding—Dick Griffith, Scotsdale, Arizona. Steer wrestling—Howard McCrory, Deadwood, South Dakota.

1942: Bareback bronc riding—Hank Mills, Montrose, Colorado. Calf roping—Toots Mansfield, Bandera, Texas. Cowgirl's bronc riding—(No contest.) Saddle bronc riding—Jerry Ambler, Klamath Falls, Oregon. Steer riding—Dick Griffith, Scotsdale, Arizona. Steer wrestling—Jack Favor, Fort Worth, Texas.

1943: Bareback bronc riding—Bill Linderman, Red Lodge, Montana. Calf roping—Toots Mansfield, Bandera, Texas. Saddle bronc riding—Louis Brooks Pittsburg, Oklahoma. Bull riding—Ken Roberts, Strong City, Kansas. Steer wrestling—Steve Heacock, Billings, Montana. Wild cow milking—John Bowman, Oakdale, California.

1944: Bareback bronc riding—Louis Brooks, Pittsburg, Oklahoma. Calf roping—Clyde Burk, Comanche, Oklahoma. Saddle bronc riding—Shirley Hussey, Moses Lake, Washington. Bull riding—Dick Griffith, Scotsdale, Arizona. Steer wrestling—Jiggs Burk, Comanche, Oklahoma. Wild cow milking—Hugh Bennett, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Eleven Bucking Horses

Col. Jim Eskew, owner and producer of the JE Ranch Rodeo with headquarters at Waverly, New York, made a trip in the latter part of November to Wisconsin where he purchased eleven bucking horses from the veteran rodeo producer of the Middle West, Joe Greer.

Greer, who has been producing rodeos for fifteen years or more, now has a number of trained horse acts playing in various parts of the country and so is retiring from the rodeo game. The bucking horses purchased by Col. Eskew are said to be among the top buckers of the country.

Two Great Associations

There is some talk of the Rodeo Association of America and the National Rodeo Association combining, and it would be an excellent thing. Both associations have the same purpose, the furthering of the interests of rodeo. The R.A.A. was the original organization, was organized in 1929 in California at a time when a few misguided politicians had introduced legislative bills that threatened to sound the death knell to cowboy sports on the West Coast.

The R.A.A. organized and defeated those bills and then went to work to help put rodeo on a higher plane and they have done a great job.

The National Rodeo Association was organized eight years later. It was first known as the Southwest Rodeo Association and was organized for the purpose of helping the rodeos of the Southwest, particularly Oklahoma and Texas rodeos. After it had grown considerably and had taken in more territory the name was changed.

Each of these associations award points to the winning contestants at their member rodeos, each has donors of trophies that are awarded with their championship titles, and the same contestants contest at rodeos of both organizations. At the end of each season there are two champions in each event, one

an R.A.A. champion and the other an N.R.A. champion. There is really no need for two organizations and were they combined it would, it is believed by many, be a great thing for rodeo.

It is estimated that 2,203,000 people paid slightly more than three million dollars to witness the 195 rodeos staged in America during 1944, and those 195 rodeos awarded prize money to winning cowboys to the extent of $605,000, which seems to be conclusive proof that rodeos are growing in popularity each year.

The Boston Show

The rodeo held in Boston Garden, Boston, Mass., in November drew nice crowds, the attendance being slightly better than in 1943. It was the fourteenth annual rodeo there. The rodeo was staged in New York for five years before the start of the Boston rodeo, but the late Col. W. T. Johnson, who at that time produced the Madison Square Garden rodeo, went on up to Boston and finally convinced the Garden management there that the Bean City would support a good rodeo.

Roy Rogers, Republic Pictures singing cowboy, was the guest star and in connection with his singing act also presented his movie horse "Trigger." The music for the rodeo was furnished by James Cimmeron's Cowboy Band while Bob Gregory and the Cactus Cowboys furnished the musical background for Rogers' singing.

The finals results were:

Bareback bronc riding—First, Howard Brown, Dublin, Texas; Second—Ralph Collier, Coleman, Texas; Third—Louis Brooks, Sweetwater, Texas; Fourth—Gerald Roberts, Strong City, Kansas.

Toots Mansfield of Bandera, Texas, won the calf roping, Jiggs Burk of Comanche, Oklahoma, was second, Jack Skipworth, of Clovis, New Mexico, was third and Tom Taylor, of Spofford, Texas, was fourth.

Paul Gould of Deming, New Mexico, won the saddle bronc riding, Carl Olson, of Lethbridge, Canada, was second, Gerald Roberts, of Strong City, Kansas, was third, and George Yardley, of Denver, Colorado, was fourth.

In the steer wrestling Gene Rambo, of Shandon, California, was best man, Bill McGuire, of Fort Worth, Texas, took second prize, Don Pore of Yuma, Arizona, was third and Bill Linderman of Red Lodge, Montana, was fourth.

In the wild cow milking, Everett Shaw of Stonewall, Oklahoma, won first prize, Shoat Webster of Lemapah, Oklahoma, was second, Jaun Salinas of Encinal, Texas, was third and there was no fourth as the others missed out somewhere along the line from the start to the finals

[*Turn page*]

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Ken Roberts of Strong City, Kansas, won the bull riding, Glenn Tyler of Modesto, California, was second, Bobby Estes of Baird, Texas, was third, and Fritz Becker of Alamoosa, Colorado, was fourth.

All Around Champion

In compiling the points of all contestants at member rodeos of the Rodeo Association of America for the 1944 season, the figures show that Louis Brooks has again won the title of Champion All Around Cowboy. The title is awarded to the contestant winning the greatest number of points in all events combined, or the greatest grand total of points.

There are however six fairly small rodeos that have not as yet sent in their report to the association on their winners, but it is hardly possible for the score at these rodeos to change the positions of the contestants in their present rating. However this prevents the R.A.A. from making a definite announcement at this time.

The standing now is as follows:

For the title of All Around Champion—Louis Brooks, 11,064 points; Gene Rambo, 10,204 points; Homer Pettigrew, 8,127 points; Bill McMacken, 7,584 points.

These figures show that this quartette of cowboys had combined winnings in rodeos that were members of the R.A.A., exclusive of entrance fee purses won, that amounted to $36,979. A conservative estimate of the amount of entrance fee purses won during the season by them would be about $7,395. The amount won by them at rodeos not members of the R.A.A. should run better than $6,000, which would make the grand total of the winnings of these four top bracket cowboys more than fifty thousand dollars.

Leaders in Various Events

For the season's title in the various events the standing of the leaders are as follows:

For the title of champion saddle bronc rider—Louis Brooks, 4,802 points; Bill McMacken, 4,334 points; Jackie Cooper, 3,987 points, and Bill Linderman, 3,705 points.

For the title of champion bull rider—Ken Roberts, 4,791 points; Dick Griffith, 4,175 points; Bob Estes, 3,499 points; Gerald Roberts, 3,215 points .

For the bareback bronc riding title—Louis Brooks, 3,852 points; Bill Linderman, 2,304 points; Howard Brown, 1,750 points; Jimmy Schumacher, 1,726 points.

In the race for the title of champion steer wrestler the leader and no doubt winner is Homer Pettigrew with 4,340 points. Next in line is Bill McMacken, with 2,864 points, then Dave Campbell with 2,835 points and Gene Rambo with 2,799 points.

For the calf roping title—Clyde Burk, 4,242

points; Homer Pettigrew, 3,335 points; Toots Mansfield, 3,003 points, and Jack Skipworth, 2,596 points.

In the wild cow milking title race, Everett Shaw accumulated 772 points, Shoat Webster 688 points, E. Pardee 659 points and John Bowman 657 points.

Other events in which season's championship titles are awarded by the R.A.A. are steer decorating, in which Padgett Berry is leading; team roping, with Murphy Chaney the leader; team tying, with Tommy Rhodes the leader, and single steer roping with John Rhodes the leader. These latter events however are produced at only a few rodeos and the total scores are not high.

The Fort Worth Event

Verne Elliott, who will manage the rodeo of the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show in Fort Worth, Texas, has already been at work on preliminary arrangements. His partner Don Nesbitt will direct the arena and their firm, Elliott and Nesbitt, will furnish the stock.

The rodeo will again be staged in the Will Rogers Memorial Coliseum, having been moved to this coliseum from the stockyards district last year on account of many of the buildings on the former show grounds having been taken over by manufacturers of war material.

Well, waddies, this about completes the feed at the old Chuck Wagon this trip, but be with us again in a couple of months. The old rangeland cafeteria will be parked near the Sam Houston Coliseum, in Houston, Texas, where the big Texas rodeo will be going on, so now while stacking the tin plates and cups we'll be saying *Adios* until next time.

—FOGHORN CLANCY

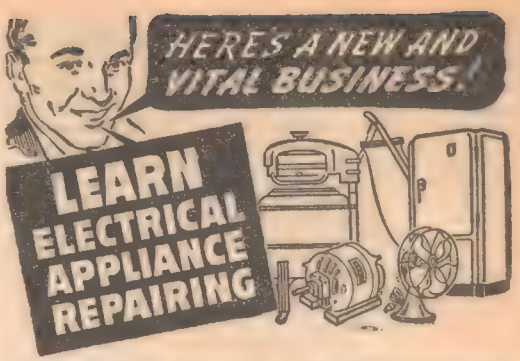
OUR NEXT ISSUE

DID you know that right after the War between the States, this country nearly drifted into another war involving Mexico? You see, General Jo Shelby, late of the Confederate forces, refused to accept the terms of the surrender of Lee at Appomattox. He would have none of what he deemed "damyankee" denomination.

He threatened to move his forces south of the Border, and either back up the Emperor Maximilian, puppet ruler for Napoleon the Little of France, or throw in with Juarez. Anyway, "General Jo" was trying to make trouble for the Union.

Tyrant or no tyrant, this country felt Maximilian had no business on the Mexican throne, a pawn of European intrigue. It was against the principles of our Monroe

[*Turn page*]



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Doctrine. We, the United States, had been too busy with our own civil conflict, to intervene up to that time. But to have a former Austrian archduke on the throne of one of our neighbors was a distinct threat to our democracy.

Union Generals Ulysses S. Grant and Phil Sheridan saw the danger. They needed a man to avert that danger. Who was better fitted for the task than Captain John Tyler Davis, U. S. Cavalry, now about to be mustered out? Davis would have liked to go home, but when he and his great dun horse Charger were needed in the service of his country, he went into action with a vengeance!

All the stirring adventures of Captain Davis are enthrallingly set forth in WEST magazine for June, in the book-length novel we have in store for you, entitled MISSOURI RAIDERS. It is by our old friend Jackson Cole, the sterling author who gave us that ripsnorter of a novel, "The Valley of Death," not to mention "Powder River Trail" and "Guns of the Mighty."

In MISSOURI RAIDERS you're going to meet some mighty interesting people. First of all, there is Latigo Holt, who is supposed to be the Union contact in Texas. You won't know at first whether this chap is a hero or a villain.

You'll meet old "General Jo" Shelby himself and realize why men followed him into the jaws of death without question. If Maximilian had listened to old Jo, the whole history of the United States might have been changed. Unreconstructed rebel that he was, Shelby was a colorful character. You just can't help liking the daring soldier.

When Captain Davis finally gets to Mexico on secret orders, you'll meet that stirring patriot, Don Benito Juarez, Zapotecan Indian, who aims to make Mexico again a republic—a genuine "Man of the People." In Davis' first interview with him, Juarez spoke his mind:

"I will never permit a Confederate State in Mexico or Central America!" he assured Captain Davis, his black eyes flashing fire.

All sorts of intrigue, doublecrossing and the ins and outs of Mexican politics, the French troops backing Maximilian on one side, the peon troops of Juarez on the other, force Captain John Tyler Davis to show his true colors and join the patriots under Juarez. He does so where adventure will be keenest—as a scout.

Swift-paced as the action has been up to this point, with plenty of gunsmoke, flying lead and hairbreadth escapes, from here on things really begin to happen!

MISSOURI RAIDERS is a thrill-packed novel that will hold you spellbound—an epic of the West you'll never forget!

Are we going to have a "Zorro" story in our next issue? You bet we are! This one is called: ZORRO OPENS A CAGE, by the originator of the character of Don Diego Vega and all of the sword-flashing, swashbuckling Zorro adventures—Johnston McCulley.

This time, Capitán Carlos Ortega makes the momentous announcement that he has finally captured the "outlaw" Zorro and placed him in a cage for all to see.

Of course we know that the man in the cage *isn't* Zorro. He is merely one Pedro Pizzaro, one of Sergeant Garcia's troopers, who is just about Zorro's size. You recall Senor the Capitán—and Sergeant Garcia. Once Zorro's sword ran through the sergeant's *left* shoulder. Perhaps this time the *right* shoulder—

Si, Senors y Senoras—the whole thing is a hoax—a veritable plant, as the Capitán knows the many peons and other lowly folk of Riena de los Angeles will gather together to rescue the man in the cage. Aha—Senors—it for this the troopers will be waiting! A prisoner or two—perhaps a little torture—

Even Don Diego himself, between sniffs of his perfumed handkerchief, makes bold to ask Capitán Ortega—what if the wrong man should be unmasked and hung on the morrow as Senor the Capitán threatens? But Don Diego is due at the birthday celebration of Don Juan Perez that very night. There will be a gay fiesta and the most beautiful Senoritas in all Alta California will be present. Senor the Capitán, perchance, will be there as well?

But alas, friends! There is no unmasking and hanging on the morrow. Something *does* happen to the right shoulder of the good Sergeant Garcia. And Don Diego Vega bemoans the fact that this villain Zorro is still at large to disturb his "peace and tranquility."

In addition to the above, the next issue will contain several corking short stories for your further entertainment! All in all, a gala number is on the way!

LETTER BOX

MORE letters, postcards, et cetera, keep pouring in anent THE STRANGER IN BOOTS, by Bradford Scott. We are glad so many of you liked this yarn so well. We thought it was a humdinger, ourselves.

[*Turn page*]

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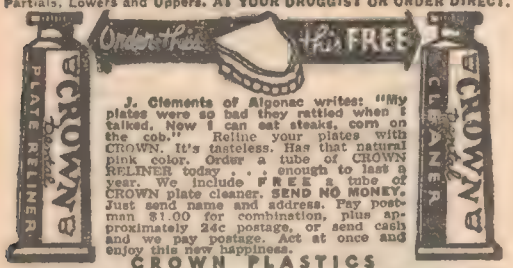

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Here's a very interesting epistle from the Hoosier State:

Just finished reading the latest issue of WEST magazine and like it fine. Am anxiously awaiting the next issue with the "Zorro" story. The character has always been one of my favorites.

Can you inform me where I can get copies of all the "Zorro" stories written to date? I would like very much to add them to my personal library which now numbers close to two hundred books.

—*Robert W. Kessens, Ft. Wayne, Indiana.*

Thank you Mr. Kessens. As for obtaining the previous Zorro stories— Mr. McCulley has been carrying his swashbuckling hero along since 1920, including the celebrated motion picture starring Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., "The Mark of Zorro." A complete collection of Zorro stories would be well-nigh impossible to put together at this time.

Here's a short letter from one of our girl readers:

I have been a reader of WEST magazine since 1942 and I sure think it's grand. I sure did like the story of the "Border Raiders" and all the rest. Please send me my membership card in your club.

—*Edith Virginia Hall, Rocky Mount, Va.*

Okay, Virginia—your RANGE RIDERS' CHUCK WAGON CLUB card will be on the way very soon now, if it hasn't already reached you. Any others want to follow Virginia's lead? Join the swellest bunch of Western fans in the country by clipping the coupon, signing it and sending it along. There are no dues or fees of any kind.

Keep your letters and postcards sweeping along in, folks. Always glad to hear from you, be it a knock or a boost.

Please address all communications to The Editor, WEST, 10 East York Street, New York 16, N. Y. Until next issue—happy reading to you.

—THE EDITOR.

IMPORTANT NOTICE

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Editor WEST
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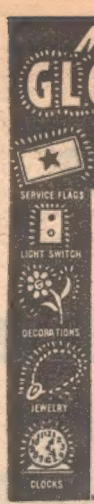

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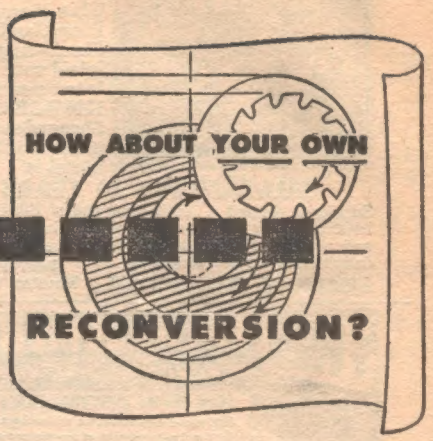

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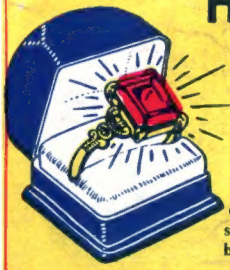

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Choice of Dainty Heart Locket or Round Hollywood Remembrance Locket with space for pictures of loved ones. Beautifully embossed 18-inch chain. *GIVEN* for selling only 10 boxes of "Gold Crown Spot Remover and Cleaner."

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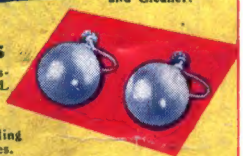

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Attractive designs in lively colors. GIVEN for selling only 5 boxes.

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"2-in-1" Sterling Silver "True Love-and-Friendship" Ring. Hands actually clasp and unclasp. *Given* for selling 10 boxes.

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